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THE
New Orleans Detective.

By ALLEN DALE.

New York.
J. S. Ogilvie & Co.
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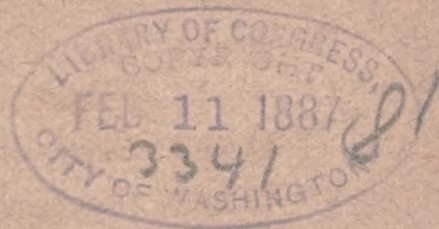
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NED BACHMAN, THE NEW ORLEANS DETECTIVE.

CHAPTER I.

IN WHICH THE VILLAIN MAKES HIS APPEARANCE UPON
THE SCENE.

AT the hour of ten upon a sultry evening in the latter part of June, a young girl sat bending over her work in the poor room of a tenement-house in the city of New Orleans.

A large piece of silk lay upon her lap, and she was working a perfect garden of flowers upon its smooth surface. Her needle flew rapidly; there was a look of expectation in her bright eyes; and her small, slim hands trembled as she thought that the task of many weary weeks was almost completed.

“There!” she cried suddenly, in bell-like tones, “it is finished at last.”

She raised her arms as she spoke. Her great joy flooded all her face with light. But suddenly this was changed. In moving her arms she pushed from its place upon the table at her side a pitcher containing water. The unlucky fluid fell upon the silk in her lap and soaked the fabric in a dreadful manner. Springing to her feet, the girl held the

silk extended in her hands, looking at it with an expression of woe that would have melted the heart of any person who had looked in upon the scene. The labor of so many long hours had been made useless in one brief second. At the thought her soft lips trembled and the tears gathered in her eyes. Hero Carnsea was not of a weak nature, and she forced them back.

"It's a shame," she wailed as she laid the silk upon the table; "it would have paid the rent for which the landlord is clamoring. I don't know what I shall do."

Her circumstances would have caused many natures to despair, and would have perplexed all. We will give the reader a brief description of Hero, and an account of the events which had ejected her from the position in society which she had an evident right to assume.

Her father, George Carnsea, had been a merchant, reputed wealthy, and highly respected. Nothing had been spared that would give benefit or pleasure to his only child until eighteen months before the date of which we write, when suddenly there had come a crash in the merchant's affairs. He had of course been aware that it must come long before, but had concealed it cleverly from Hero. He, doubtless, had expected to save something, but had failed to do so, and it broke his heart. Mr. Carnsea's health had failed owing to his troubles, and a few months after his failure had died, leaving his tenderly-reared daughter at the mercy of the un pitying world. Hero had done the best she was able since—and, indeed, before—her father's death; but ill-fortune seemed, as we have seen this evening, to follow in her footsteps. She was too pretty and delicate to prove successful in the battle she was fighting. Somewhat beneath the medium height, still no one seeing her would wish to change her form, she was so lithely and compactly shaped. Her head was almost classical in form, and lighted by a pair of soft gray eyes whose glance, as some modern

versifier has said, "could drive a fellow crazy." Her hair was dark and abundant, her complexion a fine cream; but her beauty is not to be described. It is sufficient to say that she was as charming as any lover can think his mistress.

Suddenly she raised her head, and with a sigh rolled up her work and put it away.

"It is too bad," she repeated slowly; "I have but a few cents now, and I have no means of procuring a new supply until I can finish that curtain I commenced. That will take weeks. Oh, what shall I do?"

The last words ended in what was almost a wail, and, dropping into a chair, her head fell into her hands. Her reverie had not lasted for many moments before there was a stir in the passage outside the door. The next instant a person rapped for admittance. Hero rose to open the door, but before she could move from her chair the knob was turned, and a man stepped quickly into the room. He was tall and dark, and wore a heavy brown mustache upon his upper lip. Despite the sultriness of the evening, the visitor wore a long cloak of some coarse material. His hat was drawn down over his eyes, leaving only the lower part of his face visible. Hero's gray eyes opened a trifle wider than their wont as the man crossed the threshold and closed the door. She began to grow frightened. The hour was late, and what could this man possibly want with her?

"Sir," she faltered, drawing a step backward, and still keeping her seemingly fascinated gaze upon the person before her, "have you not made a mistake?"

The man stepped forward, removing his hat. "Not if you are Miss Hero Carnsea," he said in respectful tones.

"That is my name."

"Then you are the lady I wish to see." He made another excessively polite bow, and seemed to wait for her to speak.

She looked at her visitor a moment wondering. There

was something that seemed familiar in his dark handsome face; but she could not recollect where she had seen the man before, or, indeed, if she had ever seen him.

"Your business?" she demanded at last.

"If you will allow me to explain," and again he bowed.

"My errand here is a somewhat singular one. I am a servant of Mrs.—"

"You a servant!" Hero could not help exclaiming.

The man laughed.

"Are you surprised?" he said.

"You have neither the appearance nor the speech of a servant," she said, coloring slightly as she saw her mistake.

Again the man bowed.

"Thank you," he said. "But the fact that appears to surprise you is nothing uncommon. A servant has many opportunities of becoming, in appearance at least, a gentleman; and it is often difficult to distinguish the man from the master."

The fellow spoke with the greatest volubility, and seemed to be holding Hero in conversation for his own pleasure. This occurred to her, and she said, with some coldness,

"No doubt what you say is true; but you are forgetting your mission."

"I beg your pardon," he said humbly. "As I was about to say, I am a servant of Mrs. Dalton, who desired me to come here this evening. She has need of your services, and she, being impatient of any delay when once determined upon any matter, wishes you to come this very night."

The man's manner was very respectful, his voice pleasant and smooth; but nevertheless she experienced a vague distrust of him. Nor did she feel at ease under the wandering glance of his sharp black eyes. They might be honest, but Hero doubted it.

“Why does your mistress want me?” she asked abruptly.

“Ah! I was forgetting to tell you that. Pray pardon me,” said the visitor in his smooth, glib way. “There is to be a masked ball, and Mrs. Dalton, intending to be present, has designed a costume which she wishes you to construct. The ball is to take place in two days, and, as nothing but her new idea will satisfy her, she commissioned me to bring you to her that you may commence your work to-night. Madam is not to be balked when she has once settled her mind upon anything.”

“Why did she not send the work here?” asked Hero.

“She must see you herself and give her own directions. Will you go?”

Hero bent her eyes upon the floor for a moment in sore perplexity. Was there anything ever so strange as this night summons? She knew not whether to distrust this man or place confidence in his declaration.

“How did your mistress become aware of my existence?” she asked, a shade of bitterness in her tones, as she thought of the means of her circumstances.

“Oh! easily enough. She saw some of your work at Buttons & Co.’s store, and upon making inquiries they informed her of your abode; and when she decided upon her costume she recollected you at once, and said, ‘Miss Carnsea is just the person to work out my idea.’ That is why I am here. Of course you will go with me. She will pay you fifty dollars for your work, and there is the money in advance.”

Taking a roll of bills from his pocket, the man placed them upon the table as he finished speaking. The sum was a tempting one to Hero in her present situation, and after glancing at the notes for a moment, thinking that they would be a fortune to her, she raised her eyes to the man’s face. He stood patiently waiting for her to decide.

Suddenly Hero said, "What did you say was the lady's name?"

"Mrs. Dalton."

"And she resides?"

"On C—— Street. Will you go? If so, fetch your hat and wraps. My mistress will grow impatient if we wait much longer."

This man's story may be true after all, thought Hero. She could venture a little to obtain the money which she needed so badly.

"I will go with you," she said, after a moment's pause.

"Good! You have decided wisely. The carriage waits at the door."

Hero had turned away to prepare for her journey; but as the man ended his speech she glanced quickly around. Was it fancy or did the man actually chuckle? Hero could not tell. She was nervous, and almost regretted the promise she had given.

CHAPTER II.

UNMASKED.

HERO's limbs trembled with anticipated evil as she followed her strange visitor down the dimly lighted staircase and into the nearly deserted street. But it was too late to turn back now, she thought, although wishing she had not promised to go.

"This way!" cried her guide, taking her hand. He hurried her along for a short distance until they arrived at where a carriage was standing near the sidewalk.

"Here is the carriage."

The man seemed in great haste to get away. He almost carried her into the cab, then quickly followed inside and the door was closed. Away they rattled over the rough pavement, and at every bound the horses made Hero become more ill at ease. It was so dark inside the carriage that she could not see her companion's face; and as he did not speak, Hero did not have the spirit to address him. Suddenly a laugh broke from the man's lips. It seemed that some internal glee was forced to find a vent in this wild, sinister laughter. It sent a cold shiver through the young girl's frame, and with a little cry of fear she sprang spasmodically to her feet.

"You are deceiving me!" she cried excitedly. "Stop the carriage and let me return. I will not go with you."

For an instant the man was silent; then he laughed softly.

"But I tell you to call the driver to open the door!"

"Compose yourself, my sweet," said the fellow, quietly. "You must go; you will not be cruel enough to leave me now."

The man's words caused an interpretation of his vile intentions to enter the brain of the trembling girl. As she understood the full horror of her situation, her limbs failed to support her, and, with a low, fearful cry, she sprang back upon the seat.

"Oh, why did you entice me here?" she wailed.

The man did not answer.

"Let me go this instant!" Hero continued, with as much firmness of tone as she could bring forward. "Unless you do so I will scream for help."

The scoundrel grasped her arm, and quickly covered her mouth with his hand, stifling the cry which trembled upon her lips.

"Be quiet, now," he said, the softness which had hitherto disguised his nature disappearing. "I shall not permit

you to make a scene or get me into trouble. Do you see this?"

He drew a small vial from his pocket, and held it up to the dim, dirt-encrusted lantern.

"It contains chloroform," he continued deliberately, "and if you attempt to make the slightest disturbance; I shall render you insensible. Do you understand? Remain passive and you accompany me in possession of your faculties. But if you struggle, it is your senseless body I will take along."

The man had removed his hand from her mouth, but grasped her arms. It was several moments before Hero could speak.

"Why have you entrapped me in this manner," she ventured at last, in low, frightened tones.

"Why? Because I love you."

Hero shuddered.

"Love me?" she repeated tremulously. "I never saw you before, and do not even know who you are."

"I know you, however, my pretty. I've been in love with you for a long time. You always fought shy of me, and I at last determined upon this move to make your acquaintance."

For a moment Hero remained silent; but speech even with the scoundrel who sat fronting her was preferable to her own thoughts, and again she spoke.

"Then there is no Mrs. Dalton," she said.

"Humph! Yes, but you will never see her. That story about the costume was all an invention of my own," the man chuckled with triumphant malignity.

Hero felt her blood congeal at the sound.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"Eugene Barton, at your service," he cried mockingly.

"I have never heard of you," Hero cried faintly. "Why will you not release me? Why should you wish to persecute me?"

"Because I love you."

"You are a coward!" cried the young girl defiantly.

"So, so; I am glad to see you show a high spirit, my dear. I hate these crying and sobbing girls."

For several moments after this Hero remained silent. In the mean time the carriage rolled on, bearing her nearer and nearer to destruction, as she thought. Suddenly she raised her head.

"What do you intend to do with me?" she asked in tones that would have pierced the heart of any man not hardened with criminal lust.

Barton, as he had called himself, did not reply for a moment, but sat looking at his victim, his passions displayed upon his dissipated-looking countenance.

"You are to be my wife," he said slowly, "or something that amounts to very much the same."

"You would not force me to marry you?"

"Perhaps."

"I—"

Before she could make the observation she intended, the carriage turned up to the sidewalk and came to a halt. Hero looked out of the window upon a row of palatial residences. Barton had been as good as his word in taking her to C—— Street at least. The carriage-door was thrown open, and the villain prepared to descend.

"Now no nonsense, remember," he said in brutal tones. "If you call for help, it will be the last sound you will ever utter. Just bear that in mind. I'm not a man to be trifled with."

"Tell me, at least, where I am to be taken," pleaded Hero.

"To that house;" and he pointed toward the mansion in front of which the carriage had drawn up. "And now before you leave the carriage you must promise that you will walk quietly by my side to the house, and make no appeal for help nor attempt to escape."

"And if I refuse?"

A scornful sneer contracted the villain's lips.

"If you refuse," he hissed, "you will be bound and gagged, for go you must! There is no escape for you, and you may as well resign yourself to the fact."

It did seem that there was no escape for her; and drawing a long, deep breath, Hero sighed,

"I promise."

"That's well. Come on."

He aided her to descend to the sidewalk. At this instant a sound of footsteps at no great distance became audible. The people, whoever they might be, were coming towards the place, and Hero turned her head, a wild hope thrilling her heart that she might escape the snare that had been subtly arranged for her. Two men came forward into view and walked rapidly towards them. Eugene Barton saw the approaching men. A muffled oath broke from his lips, and his hand closed on the girl's arm like a vise.

"Remember your promise," he hissed fiercely into Hero's ear. "Not a word, or you shall die."

The villain attempted to drag her up the steps leading to the mansion. Hero became faint and almost senseless. She rested like a dead weight on the man's arm.

"Damnation!" he growled between his clenched teeth.

The new-comers were but a few feet away. A moment more and they would be upon him. Barton drew a revolver from his pocket and placed the muzzle against the forehead of the shrinking girl. With a low cry for mercy, Hero's overstrained nerves gave way and she became senseless.

CHAPTER III.

THE CRACKSMEN.

LIFTING the senseless girl in strong arms, Barton strode up the marble steps. Ere he could gain the door, however, hurried footsteps came running after him. The next instant he received a blow upon the head that sent him staggering against the iron railing.

"You are at your devil's work again," cried a ringing, manly voice. "Thank God, I am here to thwart you!"

The new-comer tore Hero's scarcely animate form from the villain's arms. Barton shrieked a fearful oath. A blind sort of fury took possession of him.

"Curse you!" he yelled, presenting the black muzzle of his pistol, "you've interfered with my affairs once too often; now take the consequences."

The stranger coolly pushed up the muzzle of the revolver.

"Miss," his voice softening as he addressed her, "were you going with this man of your own free will?"

"Oh, no, no, no!" she cried earnestly.

"I expected as much when your appeal for mercy reached my ears. That alone was sufficient to arouse my suspicions. Moreover, I know Barton of old. You are not the first pure and innocent girl who has been enticed to this hell of his. But it is not too late to save you from his clutches."

"What would you do?" said Barton.

"Restore this young girl to her friends."

"Bah!" with a sneer. "You'd better try it! I don't imagine you would ever undertake another philanthropic act. You are a very good fellow, but decidedly soft. The girl is imposing on you for some purpose of her own. She

is no better than she should be; otherwise she would not be here with me."

Hero clasped her hands beseechingly. "Oh, sir," she said, "do not believe him. As God hears me, I am not vile and wicked."

Ned Bachman looked at her keenly.

"I believe you," he said, after a moment's hesitation.

"And will continue my friend?"

"Yes."

Barton meanwhile had thrust his hand behind and rung the door-bell furiously. He intended to summon some of his minions to his aid and so overpower the girl's noble protector. Fortunately Ned detected the movement, and started down the steps, still holding Hero's listless figure in his arms.

"Attempt any treachery now, and I will raise such a hue and cry as will hardly be pleasant for you. I intend to protect this girl with my life, if necessary."

Barton stood irresolute a minute, gnashing his teeth. Then the figure of a policeman could be seen coming up the street, and at no great distance. Here was help for Ned; such help as he had scarcely counted upon.

"Foiled!" hissed Barton. "You hold the winning card to-night, Bachman; but I'm not done with you yet; my day of triumph is to come."

At this instant the bolts of the house-door before which he stood were drawn back from within. He turned, threw a last vindictive glance behind him, and then disappeared through the doorway.

Ned gently released his companion's arm.

"Do not tremble," he said, "you are safe now."

"Yes, thanks to your noble efforts."

"But tell me how you came to be here at this hour and in that villain's company."

She briefly related all that had occurred.

"It will not be safe for you to go back to Green Street to-night," said Bachman, when the recital was concluded.

"What shall I do? I have no other home."

"And no friends with whom you could seek refuge?"

"Alas! none."

"That is strange," and he looked very much surprised.

"Is it?" she said quickly. "Then you have yet to learn that the poor can lay claim to very few friends in this world."

"True; but I cannot leave you to face a second peril perhaps more terrible than that from which you have just escaped. I have it! You shall go home with me."

Hero started and blushed deeply.

"With you?"

"Why not? Nay, do not be afraid," for he interpreted aright the crimson glow that suffused her fair cheek. "I am incapable of harming one so fair and innocent as yourself. You will go with me?"

"Yes."

"It is well. I live with an uncle who has adopted me. He is a good, true man, and will heartily welcome you until a more fitting place of refuge can be found."

"I will gladly go with you."

"My uncle's residence is in the suburbs," said Ned, "and is much too far for us to think of walking."

Hero and her protector now withdrew to the corner of the street, and there waited for the hack which Ned had sent for by the policeman.

Barton's residence was plainly visible from where they stood—an imposing mansion with a brown-stone front. Late as was the hour, lights still flashed from several of its windows.

"You have escaped a great peril," said Ned.

"Yes, thanks to you."

At this moment a carriage appeared. Ned lifted Hero

into it, and then followed. Hero leaned back against the cushions as the hack started off, feeling weary and listless after the intense excitement she had undergone, but failing to experience the slightest misgivings for the future, fully trusting her rescuer.

He was sitting opposite her, with the light of the carriage lamp full upon his face. It was a face to be relied upon—grave, strong, resolute. She felt drawn towards its possessor.

“We have very nearly reached our destination,” said Ned, after a few moments’ silence.

“Your friends will be greatly surprised at seeing me with you at this late hour.”

“Still you will be welcome after I relate your adventures to my uncle.”

The hack now drew up before a house situated in the suburbs of the city, in the midst of extensive grounds.

“Here we are,” said Ned, getting out. “Welcome to the Hall.”

Hero gave him her hand, and he led her up a gravelled walk, from which ascended three or four stone steps; then they were at the house-door, and the bell was rung sharply. After a brief delay a white-faced, heavy-eyed girl of about fifteen answered the summons. She was singularly disconcerted on first opening the door; she seemed to breathe a sigh of relief when she recognized Ned.

“Oh, it is you,” she said, half involuntarily.

“Whom did you think it could be?”

“I could not tell.” She seemed confused, and spoke in a faltering tone of voice. “You were not expected home to-night, Mr. Ned.”

“True; but I have changed my mind. I have brought home with me a lady friend, you perceive.”

“Yes.”

The girl did not seem at all surprised at Hero’s appear-

ance at that unusual hour. Her features expressed indifference and nothing more.

Hero looked at her curiously. Her quick eye read indications to which Ned perhaps was wholly indifferent.

"That girl has sinned and suffered," she thought, but half inclined to distrust her.

Perhaps the young man guessed something of what was passing in her mind, for he turned suddenly and said, under his breath,

"Don't mind Nancy. She is a queer creature, but, I think, faithful."

"Has she been long in your uncle's service?" asked Hero, in the same guarded tones.

"Only three weeks. She's only one of the house-maids. Uncle George engaged her out of pity for her wretched condition. She was a poor waif without home or friends."

"Indeed!" said Hero, thoughtfully.

She had seen Nancy's filmy eyes turned suspiciously upon them while they were speaking, as if trying to catch what they said. Ned failed to take notice of the fact. However, he turned and said,

"Nancy, Miss Dalton will be our guest for a few days. You will show her to a proper room and see that she wants for nothing."

"Yes, sir," courtesied the girl, though not very graciously. "Come with me, miss," she said, leading the way through a spacious hall upstairs to a luxuriously furnished bed-chamber on the second floor. She placed the lamp upon the table, and then turned to go. "I hope you will be kind enough not to have many wants," she said sullenly.

"You are tired?"

"I am clean beat out."

"How does it happen you were up so late?"

The girl shifted uneasily from one foot to the other.

"How do you know I was up?" she said suddenly. "There was plenty of time to dress after the bell rang afore I went to the door."

"But not to dress in that manner." She pointed to the girl's shoes, which were laced and tied, and to the bit of cotton lace pinned up in the neck of her dress. "You may go."

The girl quitted the room. Her haste to go puzzled Hero not a little, and on being left alone, instead of going directly to bed, she turned down the light and seated herself by the open window in a thoughtful mood. Presently she heard Ned come upstairs and enter the room adjoining her own. Then all was still.

Hero's thoughts naturally reverted to the strange conduct of the house-maid.

"Something is evidently wrong," she said to herself. "Nancy was telling me a falsehood. She was sitting up for some purpose. What could it be?"

An hour went by. Suddenly she was startled by footsteps on the ground below—soft, gliding, catlike steps, that only the deep stillness of the night rendered audible. Then she heard a voice saying in a sharp whisper,

"All right?"

"Yes," was the answer in the same tone. "The lights have been out an hour at least."

"What signal was agreed upon with the girl?"

"The whippoorwill cry."

"Go ahead, then."

A sweet, plaintive cry broke on the air—a bird-call, soft and perfect.

Hero started quickly to her feet.

"Good heavens!" she muttered, "what shall I do? The house is about to be robbed."

For a moment her strength seemed gone. While she stood trembling and panting, hurried footsteps went past her door and down the staircase.

"It is Nancy. That girl is in league with the robbers."

She was calm and self-possessed in an instant. Instead of making a great outcry, she stole softly from the room and into that occupied by Ned Bachman.

"Mr. Bachman," she said, close to Ned's ear, "awake."

He started up without so much as an exclamation of surprise.

"What is it?" he said in a voice that proved conclusively that he was in full possession of his senses.

"Robbers," she answered briefly. "Nancy has gone down to meet them."

"Good God!"

He was out of bed in an instant.

"Turn your back, Miss Dalton, but don't go; I shall be dressed in a second's time."

Indeed, it took him scarcely that to hurry on his clothes. Then he stepped to the table and took up some object lying there.

"It's my revolver," he said. "I took it with me when I went to the city to-night, and fortunately it is loaded."

He hurried from the room. Hero followed him.

"I hear them at the window below," she said. "I am going down with you."

Faint sounds could be heard from the room to the right of the wall. They entered this apartment without a moment's hesitation. A dark form was just crawling through an open window, and another stood waiting outside. Ned dashed forward, cocking his revolver as he went, and levelled it at the man. He pulled the trigger. There was a sudden groan and a muttered curse, and the sound of steps retreating rapidly. But Ned took no notice of this at the time. Turning the instant the report had died away, he clubbed the weapon and, turning, struck the villain a stunning blow on the head. At the same moment Ned became aware of a second struggle going on near at hand.

He guessed the truth instinctively. Nancy was in the apartment, and Hero was trying to detain her.

"I do not wish to harm you," he heard Hero say. "My sole purpose is to prevent you from lending aid to your confederates."

"Let her go," said Ned. "I trust the danger is over."

He struck a match and lighted the gas. Then he stooped over the prostrate ruffian on the floor. The man had been but momentarily stunned, and was already coming to his senses. Ned looked at him for an instant, and then recoiled. What he saw was a pair of flashing blue eyes staring straight up into his own, and a handsome, blond-bearded face of a man of forty-five. It was a Bachman face for all the world. Ned stared at him like one who had received a great shock. The man's face seemed a familiar one.

A strange smile curled the man's full red lips.

"You have sharp eyes, my fine fellow," he muttered, rising, and leaning an elbow on the seat of a chair. "You recognize the peculiar features of your race at a glance. You know me for a Bachman like yourself."

Ned's face blanched to a deadly pallor.

"Who are you?" he asked faintly.

"Can't you guess?" There was a spice of malice in the smile that accompanied the question. "Don't you recall the fact that one of the Bachmans ran away from New Orleans years and years ago and never came back again?"

"Good God!"

"Do you remember now who I am? If not, lock the door against all intruders. You would not like to have me taken into custody. Ned, lock the door and I will tell you the truth."

The young man seemed incapable of motion, but fixed upon Hero a wild look of appeal. She understood the look, and stepping to the door, turned the key in the lock.

CHAPTER IV.

ROBERT BACHMAN.

WHEN they were secure from intrusion by the locking of the door, the would-be robber again spoke.

"I must be off in another moment," he said, looking around with the unconcerned air of one who is master of the situation. "What I have to say must be put into very few words."

"You mean," interrupted Ned, "that you must be off if I permit you to go at all, which is hardly probable under the circumstances."

"Bah!" contemptuously; "my comrade has evidently made a run for it. I shall follow his example directly, and you will not even seek to detain me."

"Don't be too sure of that."

At this instant footsteps became audible in the hall, and doors were heard to open and shut here and there.

"The house has been alarmed," the robber said quietly; then drawing nearer to Ned: "Let me speak while I have the opportunity. In the first place, I have a question to ask. You can see for yourself that I have a Bachman face; and now for the question. Which of the Bachmans was it that fled from New Orleans so many years ago? Do you know?"

Ned groaned, but did not answer. "Speak!" cried the man, fiercely. There was an instant of dead silence in the room, the footsteps coming nearer and nearer, until they paused at the door, and a hand turned the knob.

"Who is there?" called a voice. "What is the meaning

of the confusion I have heard; and who has locked me out?"

Ned's face became ghastlier than ever in its hue. "It's Uncle George's voice," he muttered.

"Yes," smiled the insolent stranger, "I recognize it as readily as yourself; but he must not come in here—at least just at present."

"What is the meaning of your strange behavior?" cried Ned, turning on him with sudden heat.

"Before we are interrupted I wish you to answer my question. Which of the Bachmans was it fled to foreign parts?"

"It was my father!"

"Ha! ha! You've answered truly. It was your father. He fled in disgrace."

"Yes, yes."

The man laughed low and mockingly. He laid his hands on the young man's shoulders.

"You know me now," he said. "Ned, embrace your father!"

Ned Bachman must have known all this while what was coming; but he staggered back, as from a blow when these words were uttered.

"My father!" he gasped. "It's a lie; you are not my father."

"Ingrate!" hissed the man, malevolently. "Do you ask for proof?"

"I do."

"You shall have it, then."

He thrust one hand into his pocket, and drew forth a blood-stone of peculiar workmanship. "Take this," he said; "it is an heirloom. Show it to my brother George, and ask him what he thinks of the man with the Bachman face and eyes who had that ring in his possession."

The master of the house was now pounding impatiently

on the door. The moment he had ceased speaking, the would-be robber had darted through the window and was gone.

Ned dropped into a chair, trembling from head to foot. "Oh, this is terrible!" he groaned.

Hero went up to him, and laid her hand on his arm.

"Shall I open the door now?" she whispered.

"Directly." He made a frantic effort to recover his composure. "There, there; I am calmer now. I must be calm."

Hero unlocked the door and flung it wide open. The next instant George Bachman crossed the threshold, followed by two or three of the servants. He was a handsome and pleasant-faced man of sixty, with blond hair and bright blue eyes—hair that had scarcely a streak of gray as yet, and eyes that were as bright and piercing as in his younger days. He gave a slight start of surprise on seeing Hero, but bowed politely, and advanced to Ned's side.

"Ned," he said, "I thought you were to stay in the city to-night."

"I changed my mind," the younger man said, keeping his voice steady by a powerful effort.

"So, so," Mr. Bachman looked at him sharply. "What is the meaning of the confusion I have heard? Why was the door locked upon me? Who fired that shot?"

"I fired it."

"At whom or what?"

Ned glanced helplessly at Hero. "It was all the result of a mistake," he said faintly. "I heard strange voices some time since, and thought the house was being entered by burglars."

"Good gracious! I'll have the grounds searched at once."

"No, no," cried Ned, anxiously; "don't do that."

"Why not? I have heard strange voices myself. Per-

haps a gang of thieves are prowling around. Who knows?"

"Indeed, indeed, I assure you there is no cause for alarm. Uncle George," he said in the next breath with singular abruptness, "you are quite neglecting our guest, Miss Dalton. Let me present you. Shall I recount the circumstances that led her to accept of the hospitalities of the Hall?"

"If you please."

Ned drew a deep breath of relief. He intended to tell Mr. Bachman the truth eventually; but he wished to gain time, that the man who claimed to be his father should have ample time to escape. Therefore he went into a detailed account of the earlier events of the night, with which our readers are acquainted. Mr. Bachman listened attentively.

"You did right in inviting Miss Dalton to the Hall," he said when the recital was ended. "I am glad she is here under our protection," and he shook the girl kindly by the hand.

Just here lights flashed under the window, searching the lawn below. Ned ran towards the window. Ere he could reach it, however, one of the servants holding a lighted lantern appeared, leaning over the window-sill, and looking into the room straight at Mr. Bachman. "We find blood on the grass, Master," he said very gravely. "But we've seen no human being yet."

At the word "blood" Mr. Bachman fixed a piercing glance on Ned's white face. The latter dropped into a chair again. "Oh, call the men in," he moaned.

Mr. Bachman hesitated a moment, then gave orders for the servants to desist from all search. They returned slowly and reluctantly to the house, congregating in the apartment in which our friends were waiting. Mr. Bachman presently signed for them to go out.

"I wish to see my nephew alone for a moment," he said.

Hero and Nancy followed the others into the hall. The moment they were alone together Mr. Bachman approached Ned and paused before him.

"There is something very mysterious in all this," he said gravely. "Thieves have evidently sought to break into the house, and yet you are unwilling to have them pursued. Will you be good enough to tell me why?"

For answer Ned held up one hand, in the palm of which lay the blood-stone ring.

"Do you recognize that?" he asked.

Mr. Bachman's face changed as he looked at the ring. "Good God!" he cried out sharply. "How came that bauble to be in your possession?"

"It was given to me this very night."

"To-night? Impossible! That ring belonged to my brother Robert, your father. I should know it among a thousand. It was an heirloom; and he would never willingly have parted with it."

"I repeat my words: it was given to me this night."

Mr. Bachman caught his breath sharply. "Then you must have seen Robert himself," he cried.

"Perhaps. I do not know him. You would never tell me about him. Tell me now—tell me, Uncle George."

The elder man's brow darkened. "Your father disgraced all of us," he said in a low, stern voice. "He committed a forgery, was detected, and fled the country. I have never seen him since; and have never cared to speak his name, even to you, his innocent son."

"He still lives?"

"I know not. He was in Paris the last I knew of him. Since then the report has come several times that he was dead. He wore the ring you hold in your hand when he went away so many years ago."

"He does live," cried Ned, excitedly. "He has been in this house to-night."

Mr. Bachman recoiled. "Great heavens!" Then slowly an awful suspicion seemed to creep upon him. He dropped into a chair panting for breath.

"Tell me all that has happened within the last hour."

Ned told him; and the old gentleman's face grew whiter as the recital went on.

"That was your father, poor boy," he murmured at last. "Oh, just Heaven, that Robert should come back now, and a common burglar!"

Meanwhile Hero and Nancy had lingered for a moment in the hall on quitting the room in obedience to Mr. Bachman's request. Nancy seemed dazed and bewildered. She stood leaning against the wall trembling, and evidently at a loss which way to turn. Hero laid one hand on the girl's shoulder. She could not help pitying the frightened, guilty creature.

"Why did you unfasten the window by which one of the burglars gained admittance to the house?" Hero asked. "You must have known what a wicked thing it was to do."

The girl cowered still closer to the wall.

"Don't look at me like that, miss," suddenly and violently. "I couldn't help it. They put me there for that very purpose; and I don't dare refuse to let them in when they give the signal."

Hero gazed at the girl with horror.

"You don't mean to say that you are in the house for no other purpose than to assist thieves and cut-throats in their nefarious work?"

"But I do, miss," was the sullen answer. "They forced me to come here and tell the story I did, and find out all that was possible about the plate, and where master kept his money. I've done it more than once afore now."

"Oh, you wicked, wicked girl!"

"I don't care if you do call me wicked," was returned in a low, dogged tone. "How could I help myself? God knows it isn't because I really want to be wicked that I do the bidding of those men. They'd kill me if I didn't obey them; and master and the rest will find some way to punish me because I did obey them. Oh, I wish I had run away with the Captain."

"With the Captain?"

"Yes; the man who talked so long with Mr. Ned. He's Captain Lavern. If I'd gone with him I'd have been safe with the Black Band by this time."

Hero stared at her.

"What is the Black Band?" she asked.

"I won't tell," said Nancy, sullenly.

"It must be a secret organization of some kind."

The girl was silent.

"A band of cut-throats, perhaps?"

Nancy still remained with her mouth shut tight. Hero looked at her attentively. The longer she looked the more she pitied her.

"Nancy," she said suddenly, "the way is now clear for you to leave the house. I shall not seek to detain you. I am sorry for you, and can do nothing to make your lot harder to bear than it is now. Perhaps I am wrong to connive at your escape, but I do not believe that I am."

"I will go," cried Nancy, shaking off the lethargy that had held her powerless. "God bless you, miss. The time may yet come when I can be of help to you." She turned and walked swiftly from the house, her eyes, as they last rested on Hero, glowing with gratitude and love.

CHAPTER V.

AT BRIARMERE.

IN the suburbs of New Orleans, and but a short distance from the Hall, the home of the Bachmans, stands an elegant private residence known as Briarmere. It was, at the time of our story, occupied by one André de Noir, a Frenchman, and his daughter Hortense. The neighbors shook their heads and looked wise when anything was said of Briarmere or its inmates. There is mystery about the house, about Monsieur de Noir, and about the charming Hortense herself. They exchange visits with none of their neighbors. During the day the blinds are drawn, and there is always an air of quiet and desolation about the place; but when evening once sets in, numberless carriages roll in at the gates to deposit their inmates at the door. In fact, the place was a quiet gambling-hell.

Nearly twenty-four hours previous to the events narrated in the first chapter of this tale, at the hour of sunset, Hortense de Noir was sitting in a richly furnished apartment at Briarmere, listlessly turning over the leaves of a novel. She was a marvel of sensuous beauty. The rich-hued dinner-dress she wore was cut low in the neck, leaving a portion of her magnificent shoulders and bust exposed. Her skin was like alabaster in its transparency and purity. She was a dangerously beautiful woman.

While she sat there, her head resting against one of her softly rounded arms, the room door was opened, and a man, tall, dark, and handsome, strode into the apartment. The man was Eugene Barton. He approached the reclin-

ing beauty, passed his arm around her waist, and even ventured to press a kiss upon her ruby lips.

"How fares it with the beautiful Hortense?" he asked in a caressing tone.

"Well," she replied briefly.

"How have you passed the day?"

"In sleeping, for the most part, as usual," and her lips parted in a dazzling smile. "You know, Eugene, I am compelled to take by daylight what I am denied at night."

"Of course. What a charming bait you are, Hortense, for the goldfish Monsieur de Noir lures into his net."

He laughed jeeringly. Hortense put her hand to his lips with a frown of displeasure.

"You should be the last person to reproach me, Eugene."

"I do not wish to reproach you. Go on, my charmer, and fleece all the fools you please. It is nothing to me."

He spoke lightly, but his face was moody and clouded. The woman at his side looked at him long and earnestly.

"You are not yourself, Eugene, to-night," she said at last. "Has anything occurred to vex you?"

"Yes."

"It is nothing I have done? You are not angry at me for encouraging Ned Bachman as I have done of late?"

"No; I wish you to encourage him. Much as I love you, Hortense, our relations must some day come to an end, and it is better that you should provide yourself with a husband against that time."

She flushed painfully, and bit her lips. "I understand your meaning," she said quickly. "You are beginning to tire of me, and want a fresher victim. Well, I cannot blame you very much."

He looked at her keenly. "Don't talk in that way, or I shall think you are jealous," he returned. "I shall always be fond of you; but I can't marry you myself; and it was

your welfare I had in my mind when I spoke. Besides, Hortense, even if you were to take another man for a husband—Ned Bachman, for instance—I can't see that our intimacy need cease entirely."

She turned away her face. "You have not told me what it is that troubles you," she said shortly and sharply.

"I am coming to that directly. Ned Bachman is mixed up in the affair. In short, he has foiled me again—foiled me, and himself borne off the prize, my intended victim. She is now at the Hall."

Hortense started away from him in unfeigned astonishment. "At the Hall?" she repeated.

"Yes; more's the pity! You should have a finger in the pie, you see, as she may prove a dangerous rival to your ladyship. Have a care, my dear; your prospects of securing a rich husband will be gone all of a sudden."

She laughed in a low, mirthless way. "I am not easily outgeneralled," she said.

"No; perfectly true. But I wished to put you on your guard. How much does Bachman know of your real position in this house?"

"Very little. I have succeeded in arraigning his warmest sympathies in my behalf. He has not a doubt of my innocence and truth, and thinks I am actually compelled by my father to lead this sort of life."

"Humph! So much the better. Has he ever spoken of love to you?"

"Not directly; but he likes me immensely. A declaration has trembled on his lips more than once, but he has always restrained himself. I think he cannot wholly reconcile himself to the equivocal position I occupy in society."

Barton rubbed his hands softly together—a sign with him that he was well pleased.

"Bring him to the point as soon as possible, Hortense. If you don't, he will slip through your fingers. As for my

part, I'll take care to separate him from the girl of whom I spoke."

"Do so."

"Now I have told you the first cause for my dejection; here's to the second. The Black Band were unfortunate in their last venture."

"The Black Band!"

"Hush! not so loud, if you please. Perhaps you have heard the news."

"I have heard nothing."

"You know that plans had been laid for the Hall last night?"

"Yes."

"Captain Lavern and Dwis Cadelle were selected for that purpose. By some means they were discovered, and a shot was fired, the ball lodging in Cadelle's arm. As for the Captain, he had a narrow escape of it; but after a hard struggle he managed to get away without injury worse than a few bruises."

"And no plunder was brought away?"

"None. As I tell you, our pals themselves barely managed to escape."

Eugene Barton used the word "pals" designedly. It was a fact that, wealthy aristocrat though he was, he belonged to the secret organization known as the Black Band, of which Nancy made mention to Hero.

Hortense de Noir, though a cultivated and delicately nurtured woman, also had her name enrolled in the annals of this strange and secret society, for it counted both sexes among its numbers.

These two persons, Hortense and Barton, were really fond of each other, but they were far too sensible or worldly-wise to suffer this attachment to stand in the way.

Barton was a married man, wedded to a woman several

years older than himself, whom he had married, not for herself, but for the sake of her coupon-bonds and bank-stock. But the matrimonial bonds rested very lightly on his shoulders, and very few of his leisure moments were spent in the company of his wife.

Hortense was the daughter of a French adventurer, gambler, and robber. At the date of our story he gave his name as André de Noir, and was supposed by people not acquainted with his real business to be a speculator and gentleman-at-large. She had been trained from her cradle in the path of crime. A handsome woman, but false and unscrupulous, stopping at nothing to gain her ends. Her love for Barton would last just so long as he furnished all the money she cared to spend, and did not interfere with any of her plans.

In fact, they were a mutual help, a mutual benefit to each other in more than one sense of the term.

Barton, after sitting for some time discussing the prospects for the future, rose to go.

"Play your cards well, Hortense," he said at parting. "I am especially anxious that you should become the wife of Ned Bachman."

"Why?" she asked.

"Because I hate the man, and because—" He hesitated, looking at her sharply. "No matter for the other reason. Let it suffice that I wish to see you removed from this den and well settled in life."

"Why don't you take me away yourself?"

"Impossible. My wife is already suspicious. There would be a discovery and trouble."

"A little prussic acid would remove that difficulty."

He shuddered. "I can't stoop to murder," he said in a husky voice.

"Bah!" she cried contemptuously. "You're wonderfully scrupulous all at once. Never mind, though; I'm

quite ready to console myself with Ned Bachman. To be frank with you, I can't help liking the man."

"And especially his wealth and position," returned Barton, with a curl of the lips.

"Oh, of course those count for something. From this hour I intend to struggle desperately for the privilege of being made his wife."

"What then?" said Barton, with lowering brow. A cold, sneering smile played around his lips.

"Then," she answered, "I may perhaps reform, play the model wife, and so forget that I was ever an inmate of a gambling-hell and Eugene Barton's mistress."

He burst into a loud, coarse laugh. "You reform!" he repeated sneeringly. "There is no fear of that. So play your cards as skilfully as you choose. I'm not afraid of losing the sunshine of your smiles, fair one. Where there is passion in the blood it will work itself out. Married or single, you still remain Eugene Barton's mistress until you give up the ghost."

And having given utterance to the words, he sauntered leisurely into an inner room where the tables of *rouge-et-noir* were waiting, it being yet too early for the frequenters of the place to arrive.

CHAPTER VI.

FATHER AND SON.

THE unexpected discovery that his father still lived, and in the person of a common thief and burglar, completely overwhelmed Ned. Heretofore his father's name had been prohibited in his uncle's household, and Ned had gradually come to think of him as being dead. Guilty wretch though the man was, it was not possible for Ned to remain

indifferent to the person who had been instrumental in giving him life. He soon determined to seek out his father in the low haunts he was likely to frequent, and do his utmost to reclaim him. He searched long and patiently without success; and he was about to give up in despair, thinking, perhaps, that his father had left the country, when one day as he was about passing one of the principal streets of the city, he met the object of his search face to face.

Robert Bachman seemed very much startled at the encounter, and endeavored to elude an interview; but Ned grasped him by the coat-sleeve and held him fast.

"You shall not elude me now, father," he said resolutely. "I have been seeking you too long for that."

At the word "father," a singular smile played around the man's handsome lips, and he ceased at once to struggle.

"You're a queer one, Ned. And so you do care just a little for the man who helped bring you into being?"

The young man's face whitened.

"I cannot forget the tie that binds us."

"Humph! you really mean it, Ned? You are not setting a trap to give me up to justice?" and he looked sharply and suspiciously at his companion.

"Do you think me capable of such treachery towards you, father?"

The man laughed in an easy, assured way.

"No, no, I'll not distrust you, my boy; you're true to the back-bone. But I see you've got something to say to me; and as we can't talk here, I'll show the way to a place where we can converse without fear of interruption."

He led the way down a neighboring alley and into a second street, finally descending the steps leading to an underground drinking-saloon. Ned shuddered at being led into such a place, but followed his father without an instant's hesitation.

The saloon was but a common basement, filled up with a bar and half a dozen small tables. At one of the latter Robert Bachman seated himself, and signed for Ned to take a chair opposite his own.

"Now, my dear boy, tell me why you were searching for me."

"Is it so very strange that I should wish to find my own father?" asked Ned, bitterly.

"Perhaps not; though I can't pretend to enter into your feelings in that respect. Now that you've found me, what do you want?"

Ned drew a deep breath.

"I wish to entreat you to mend your ways, and lead an honest life," he said after some hesitation.

"With everybody, even my own brother George, against me, and flinging the past perpetually in my face, really, my dear boy, I can't see it."

"What should we care for Uncle George, or for anybody else? We will go away from New Orleans, and begin life anew in some place where we are not known."

The handsome sinner gazed at his son in amazement.

"Would you really do that?" he said. "Would you cast your fortunes with mine?"

"Yes, if you would only promise to reform."

"George would disinherit you."

"I know that."

"You would sacrifice wealth and position."

"No matter."

Robert Bachman brought his hand down upon the table with resounding force.

"By Jove! boy, you are a noble one. If things were a little different," and here a shade passed over his face, "I might be tempted to listen to you; but now it is of no use. If you had plenty of money at your command, it would be

different; but starvation in a garret never sat well on my stomach."

Ned could scarcely conceal his disgust.

"Will you not listen to me?" he said, making a last appeal. "I am young and strong and not afraid to work. I will give all my energies to the work of your redemption."

A cruel sneer curled the man's lips.

"Is this all you have to say to me? Have you no other object in seeking me out?"

"None," he returned sadly. He lowered his eyes thoughtfully.

"How long have you been in this country?" he said suddenly.

"Two or three years."

"And I never guessed you were here until that night!"

Robert Bachman smiled.

"My loving relations thought I was six feet underground, and it suited my purpose that they should continue to think so until the time came for me to reveal myself to them."

"Has it come now?"

"It came that night at the Hall. I was in a tight place, and saw only one way of getting out of it. No matter; it only precipitated things a little. I had already made up my mind to seek you out."

"And you were there to rob your own brother?"

"Humph! I knew that George had money and valuable plate in the house; and a fellow must live, you know."

"Good heavens!"

"You seem surprised."

"I am surprised and humiliated," said Henry in a sad tone.

He suddenly extended one hand across the table and laid it on his father's arm.

"Is it true that you belong to a band of organized robbers and desperadoes?"

The man nodded.

"What's the use of keeping a close tongue with you, Ned; you'll not dare betray me?"

"No, I shall not betray you."

"Then here goes for a confession. I am a member of a secret confederation known as the Black Band. We—"

"The Black Band!"

"Hush! Yes, that's the name. The object of the organization I do not choose to reveal just at present. You know one of them already—plunder."

"Yes, yes."

"I am at the head of the Black Band, and known to its members as Lavern."

The man seemed to feel no shame in thus relating his crimes to his son, but rather to plume himself upon his bad actions, as though they were something honorable and glorious. Ned averted his face.

"Tell me no more," he said in a low, weary tone of voice.

Lavern the cracksman, for thus we shall call him in the future, shrugged his shoulders whimsically. He seemed to have formed a sudden resolution.

"I might as well make a clean breast of it," he said after a brief silence, "so to be frank, I want your help."

"My help?"

"Yes," sullenly. "I know that my brother George has several thousand dollars locked in the desk of his study."

Ned started. His father had spoken truly.

"How did you know that?" he asked quickly.

"No matter. I want that money. I wanted it the other night when I came so near getting into trouble. George would never miss it, and it would do me worlds of good. You have been urging me to reform and lead an honorable life. On one condition I will listen to you,"

The young man started up from his chair ghastly white.

“And that condition?” he asked just above his breath.

Lavern rose also, his blue eyes glittering strangely; and putting his lips close to Ned’s ear, he said,

“It is that you get that money for me.” Then he drew back a pace or two, watching the effect of his words. “Bring me that money,” he added, “and I give you my word of honor that I will reform.”

CHAPTER VII.

LAVERN THE CRACKSMAN.

“WHAT do you say?” broke out Lavern, half angrily. “Will you get me the money or not?”

Ned was expecting the base proposition, but he recoiled in spite of himself.

“What!” he cried sharply. “You wish me to steal the money? You wish to make a thief out of your own son?”

Lavern gave a disdainful laugh.

“Why not? You only take what is sure to be your own some day, if George makes you his heir. Besides, you needn’t be squeamish in regard to the matter. Remember, your father is a thief before you.”

“Impossible.”

“Well, you have heard my proposition. Bring me the loose thousands which I know are lying in George’s desk this moment, and I will shake off my old associates, go away from New Orleans, and lead an honest life.”

“What you ask of me is too much. Rob my uncle who has been so kind to me! Father, it is impossible. I am willing to give up my life, if need be, for your salvation, but to betray the confidence of my benefactor, I will not.”

“You won’t do what I ask of you?”

“I will not steal, even for you.”

“Bah!” and he laid his hand heavily on Ned’s arm, and a dark, villainous look showed itself on his face. “You dare not betray me!” he hissed between his teeth.

“I repeat, I shall not betray your confidence.”

Lavern seemed very much relieved by this assurance. His features relaxed, and a cunning smile parted his lips.

“Of course you won’t, my boy. You wouldn’t like to see your father juggled? Of course you wouldn’t. I’ll trust you.”

“But I’ll not trust you,” the young man thought.

Lavern studied the young man’s face thoughtfully for some moments. “I’ll win him over,” he muttered under his breath. “But my first advances must be made with caution. This is a timid bird. That parental dodge is just the thing for my purpose. It will bring him to terms when nothing else could.” Then he added aloud,

“We’d better take leave of each other for the present, my boy. But I must see you again. You will come to this place at four o’clock to-morrow afternoon?”

“Yes,” said Ned, after a moment’s hesitation, “I will come,” and he left the saloon, leaving his father at the table calling for more liquor.

Ned had no faith in Lavern’s promises. With the money he coveted once in his possession, the cunning rogue was sure to snap his fingers in Ned’s face. He kept his own counsel, therefore. But he strangely kept silent and taciturn; so much so that both his Uncle George and Hero, who was yet at the Hall, noticed it, and suspected the cause.

Punctually at four o’clock the next day he went to the underground saloon. The Captain was there before him, sitting at one of the dingy little tables, leisurely sipping his liquor. This time he made quite a show of affectionate in-

terest, and persisted in calling Ned "my dear boy," "my long-lost son," etc., nearly every minute. The interview was less protracted than that of the day before, Captain Lavern seeming anxious to get away. When they rose to take leave of each other, he said, with well-assumed earnestness,

"I am very anxious that we should know each other better, my dear boy. It seems hard that father and son should be separated so long. You feel this as sensibly as I do?"

"Yes, yes."

"Then we must contrive to see as much of each other as may be; and to-morrow night, if you would like to go, I will take you to my present quarters."

"Where is that?"

Captain Lavern smiled knowingly. "Come to this place to-morrow evening at dusk, and you shall find out for yourself."

Ned did not like the expression of his father's face as he gave utterance to the invitation. There was something furtive and treacherous in the gleam of those handsome blue eyes of his.

"Why should I come? What good will these secret interviews accomplish?"

"That remains to be seen. Have you curiosity to see the place your father calls home?"

"Yes."

"Then do not hesitate. You are doing me good, my son, by your presence merely. You may be of incalculable benefit in the future."

The villain's words had a double meaning.

"Oh, that I might be!" said Ned.

"Then try to oblige your poor father in this respect. I wish to welcome you to my humble domicile. It will be a real pleasure to welcome you under my own roof for once. You will come?"

"Yes, I will go," Ned said, as much to himself as to his father.

It was evident that he distrusted Captain Lavern's suave speeches, and suspected that some plot was on foot for the purpose of obtaining the money the Captain coveted.

Captain Lavern chuckled, shook hands with the young man with more effusion than ever, and went away somewhat hurriedly. He evidently thought he had gained a point.

Ned prepared to follow him. The last few words had been exchanged close to the door of the saloon; and after his companion had left, Ned went slowly up the steps leading to the street. He had scarcely reached the pavement, when a woman with a veil drawn over her face slipped quickly from a doorway of a neighboring building and approached.

"What did that man want of you, Mr. Bachman?" she asked.

Ned started. He instantly recognized the voice.

"Miss Dalton!" he cried in a tone of amazement.

"Hush!" and she made a sign of caution. "Answer my question, if you please."

The young man was silent for a moment. "Come away from this hateful neighborhood," he said presently, "and I will tell you what you wish to know."

She took his arm, and they made their way into one of the more populous streets. Ned was the first to begin the conversation.

"Why are you here, Miss Dalton?" he asked.

"I followed you," she answered naively.

"What for? Do you not know the peril you are in in appearing in the streets unprotected? Barton might discover you."

"I am disguised, you perceive."

Hero still kept her veil lowered. Ned gently pressed her hand,

"Nevertheless it was a hazardous expedition on your part to come here from the Hall alone," he said. "Why did you do it?"

"I followed you because I knew that you were coming hither to meet that man, and I was afraid that something might happen to you."

Ned looked pleased, and a flush mounted to his very ears.

"And you even faced peril for my sake. God bless you, Hero!"

She was trembling more violently than ever, but she made a brave effort to regain her self-control. They were fast verging on a dangerous subject, and she had the tact to turn the conversation in another direction.

"You have not answered my question," she said abruptly. "What did that man have to say to you?"

"I have promised to visit him at his present habitation to-morrow evening."

"You have?" Her tone indicated surprise and consternation.

"Yes. Was it unwise of me?"

"I think so, very."

"You recognized the man?"

"Yes. He was the same who was thwarted in the burglarious attempt at the Hall a few nights since."

"He is."

"And the same who pretends to be your father."

Ned started. "Who pretends to be?" he repeated. "What do you mean?"

"You have no positive evidence of what he asserts. And if he is your father, I think you should shun him, since appearances indicate that he is trying to lead you into danger of some sort. Remember his past history! The man is an outcast, and has been for years. When you first fell in with him he was engaged in an attempt to plunder his own

brother! Surely, there can be very few germs of good in such a man."

Henry groaned, "I fear as much."

"You would do right in shunning him."

"Alas! as vile as he is, I cannot throw him off altogether. I feel that he is my father, and I must at least make an attempt to reclaim him; and to do that, it is best that I should fill all my appointments with him."

Hero ceased to argue the question, though she suspected Lavern's motive in following up Ned so closely.

The young man called a hack, and the two drove back to the Hall together. Even in the perplexity and perturbation of the moment he could not help feeling an inexpressible thrill of happiness at the thought that Hero had manifested so deep an interest in his safety. The girl was growing dearer to him every day they were together.

CHAPTER VIII.

NED AND THE SIREN.

WHEN Ned reached the Hall, he found a note waiting for him. It contained only these words:

"Why have you neglected me so completely of late? I am longing to see you. Will you not come to see me early this evening?"

A guilty flush rose to Ned's temples on reading this brief epistle; he felt that he deserved the reproaches it contained, as he had not been near Briarmere for several days. He felt a strange repugnance to renewing his visits to the fair enchantress; and yet he had been accustomed to go to Briarmere nearly every day. He did not acknowledge, even to himself, that Hero Dalton had been instru-

mental in opening his eyes to the falsity of his passion. But though he shrank from meeting Hortense, he could not well disregard the summons; so he dressed himself for the visit.

Hortense sat alone in the handsome parlor when he reached Briarmere. The twilight shadows were just beginning to gather, and the rooms devoted to *écarté* and *rouge-et-noir* were silent as so many tombs when he passed them. The fair Circe looked surpassingly lovely. She was dressed in some soft fleecy material that left exposed her rounded arms and shoulders, a carmine stain burned in either cheek, and her eyes fairly dazzled him with their brilliancy, as she extended both slim white hands in greeting.

"You are here at last, Ned," she murmured. "It seems an age since I have seen you."

"Why did you send for me?" he said after he returned the compliment.

He made a movement to seat himself by her side; but she stopped him with a motion of her hand.

"Not here," she cried. "I cannot talk here, and I have much to say to you. Come with me into the garden; we will be less liable to interruption there."

She led the way from the house, and immediately struck into a path that conducted into a remote part of the garden.

"I'm going to have you all to myself," she said with a forced laugh. "For a few blissful moments I will flee from my misery."

"Misery?" he repeated.

"Ah, do I puzzle you, Ned? No matter; you shall soon understand me better."

In the most remote quarters of the grounds stood a single pavilion, shut in by trees and shrubbery. It was built of stone, with only one window on the lower floor—a small grated affair. A low door studded with iron nails was the

only means of ingress or egress. Hortense approached this door, produced a key from the pocket of her dress and turned it in the lock.

"Let us mount to the top of the tower," in a tone of voice that jarred strangely on the ears of her companion. It is cooler there; besides we will have the place all to ourselves on this evening."

She passed in, leaving the key in the lock, on the outside. Ned followed her over a smooth stone floor, half groping his way, for the shadows were already deep and black in the cell-like place. A spiral iron staircase ascended from the middle of the lower room to the roof of the tower, which was surrounded by an iron railing. They mounted the stairs to the roof, Hortense taking a seat on one of a number of rude benches which were arranged around inside the railing, and motioned for Ned to take a seat by her side. Ned was touched by her suffering, and taking her hand, pressed it gently. How was he to know that she was only playing a part to accomplish his ruin—only seeking to entangle him inextricably in the meshes of the nefarious plot?

"Let me open my whole heart to you," she whispered. "You are the only friend I have in all this vile place."

"Speak freely, Hortense," he said.

"I will. The time for concealment has gone by. You must have guessed much of the miserable truth already, and I wish you to hear it all from my lips."

"You refer to the business that is carried on in Briar-mere?"

"Yes. Oh, it is horrible!" and she shuddered with well-counterfeited disgust. "I would a thousand times rather die than play the part I am compelled to play. I am made a bait, a lure, by which foolish dupes are enticed to yonder hell. Oh my God, it is terrible!"

"So there is no help for you?"

"None. My father is hard and unscrupulous. He would be very angry did he know what I have told you. It is he that compels me to lead the life I do."

"You might appeal to the authorities."

"No, no; I dare not do that. My father would kill me, if he were compelled to wait a score of years before striking the fatal blow."

Ned's face flushed with honest indignation.

"Will you not let me help you, Hortense?" he cried impulsively. "Will you not let me take you away from that bad, heartless man?"

She lifted her eyes quickly to his face, then dropped them again in seeming modest confusion.

"How would you take me away, Ned?" she asked softly, sweetly.

"Surely," he began, with difficulty suppressing the burning words which thronged to his lips, "I can give you a brother's support, a brother's protection. I can—" He paused in unaffected confusion, as the sound as of muffled footsteps became audible in the garden below. Scarcely knowing why he did so, Ned ran to the railing and looked down in the direction whence the sounds proceeded. Twilight had deepened rapidly and it was quite dark, but he felt assured that he saw a man's figure disappearing in the shrubbery at a little distance from the tower. Singular as it may appear, he at once thought of Eugene Barton.

"I fear that we have been followed and watched," he said in a low tone of voice, turning to his companion.

"Who could have followed?" said Hortense. "My father was not likely to do that; he has no suspicion of the nature of our intimacy, and the servants would hardly play the spy on my movements."

"And yet I am sure I saw a man in the garden, and he could have no business there at this time of day unless it was to play the spy."



"Are you sure you saw some one?" asked Hortense, who had become strangely pale and frightened.

"Let us return to the house," he said in a changed tone of voice. "The hour is late to be in this part of the grounds."

Hortense rose, still trembling in every limb. She clung close to her companion's arm while they descended the stairs together. They found the room below wrapped in almost impenetrable darkness. Ned uttered a sudden exclamation.

"I am sure we left the outside door ajar on going up."

"We did."

"And it is closed now. How dark it is!"

Ned groped his way to the door and easily found the latch. It could be raised without difficulty, but the door would not yield an inch. It had been locked from the outside. A cry of anger burst from Ned's lips.

"There has been a spy upon our movements!" he exclaimed, "and we are locked in this gloomy place."

"Good heavens! Who could have locked the door?"

"Eugene Barton, no doubt. I feel sure of the man, now; but how he happened to be in this vicinity is more than I can tell. He has threatened me more than once already, and this is one proof of his malicious hatred."

Hortense answered nothing, though a strange smile played about her lips which the darkness concealed. Ned beat upon the door several times with his fists and called out several times, but the wall of the place seemed to stifle his voice, for it died away in hollow echoes. He felt sure that the sounds could not penetrate to any distance.

"We must go back to the roof of the tower," he said, after several futile attempts to summon assistance. "It will be pleasanter waiting there than in this damp, dismal room."

They ascended the stairs. Overhead now was a purple

arch of stars, and the last rose-red flush of sunset had faded from the western sky. At no great distance the lights of the city could be seen twinkling through openings in the shrubbery. Hortense flung herself upon the floor at Ned's feet, resting her clasped hands over his knee.

"How still, how deathly still it seems," she murmured shiveringly.

"Yes, it is very uncomfortable to be shut up here."

"Must we remain here long, Ned?"

"Unless some one comes to our assistance we must remain until morning," he answered gravely.

"Oh, no, no, Ned; don't say that. We must go back. Shout for help; somebody must hear you!"

"Be calm, Hortense. You know as well as I do that the grounds are deserted after nightfall. Unless the man who locked us in should come to our assistance, there is no hope for us."

"Oh my God! I am lost, lost!" she moaned in well-affected despair.

"Lost?" repeated Ned.

"Yes, if I am compelled to remain here alone with you all night long."

He started violently, the hot blood rushing to his very brow. "Have you no faith in my honor, Hortense?" he asked reproachfully. "Do you think me base enough to take advantage of your present position?"

"No, no."

"Then calm yourself."

"It is not you I fear, Ned," she murmured. "But don't you see, don't you comprehend my position? The world judges harshly one's actions; and if I should remain alone with you this night, to-morrow morning I shall be more irreparably ruined in the eyes of the world than a score of years of constant contact with the vile characters who frequent my father's saloons could ruin me."

The young man shuddered, and a cold perspiration broke out upon his forehead. He comprehended the full force of the beautiful schemer's reasoning. "True, true," he muttered.

"Oh, Ned, pity me."

"Do not despair," said Ned, soothingly. "Your father and others will miss you from the rooms; they may come directly hither in search of you."

"Oh, no, they will not; I feel assured they will not; and the enemy who has locked us in here is sure to make matters look as bad as possible. God help me, for I am a ruined woman!"

There was a breathless silence. Hortense had reached the pinnacle of her acting. Would she win the game, or would Ned escape the trap so skilfully set for him?

"Not so," he said with a long, gasping sigh as he lifted the bowed head of the siren and pressed a burning kiss upon her lips. "Not so; I will save your good name by making you my wife. I can do no less after this fatal night's events. Hortense, will you be my wife?"

She had conquered, and the trap set by her and Eugene Barton had secured the victim. Ned Bachman had promised to make her his wife.

All night long, Ned and the fair temptress who had betrayed him sat there under the purple heavens, clasped in each other's arms. No one came to disturb them, they heard no unusual sounds, and yet when they descended to the ground-floor of the tower in the morning they found the key in the lock and the door standing wide open. They walked to the house and rung the bell.

"I shall ask to see your father," said Ned while waiting for the servant to make his appearance, "and I shall explain everything to him at once, and let him know our purpose."

"Not to-day," pleaded Hortense. "Come to-morrow, if

you choose, and corroborate the story I myself shall tell. I am tired and must rest to-day."

Ned hesitated an instant, but finally walked reluctantly away.

CHAPTER IX.

IN THE DEN OF THE BLACK BAND.

NED BACHMAN passed a wretched day on returning from Briarmere. He was a prey to the alternate emotions of anguish and despair. He had been forced into an engagement with Hortense de Noir much against his will. She plotted successfully, and he had not been left a loophole for escape. He was too much of a man of honor to break his word to her, although, alas! too late he knew he loved another. And yet he was resolved to keep his appointment with the man who claimed to be his father.

Ten o'clock had struck when he reached the underground saloon that had been the former place of meeting. Captain Lavern was there before him, waiting on the steps without, and an exclamation of satisfaction burst from his lips when he saw and recognized our hero.

"You came, of course, with the intention of accompanying me to my lodgings," he said, after they had shaken hands and passed the compliments of the day.

"Yes. Let us be off. I'm not any too fond of our present neighborhood."

"Humph!" chuckled the Captain. "You ought to familiarize yourself with such places, just as I do."

He began to move away, however, even as he spoke. They were followed, though they knew it not, by a stealthy

figure enveloped in the folds of a huge cloak—a figure that dogged their footsteps with the persistency of a shadow.

Captain Lavern led the way along several narrow and gloomy streets, until they passed before the iron-clamped door of what had once been a low public-house, but it was now apparently uninhabited.

“Here we are at last,” he said, with a grim smile of satisfaction.

“You do not lodge *here*?” cried Ned, in tones of unaffected amazement.

“You shall see for yourself.”

Captain Lavern looked carefully up and down the alley to assure himself that nobody was in sight. The dark figure that had shadowed them had suddenly squeezed itself into an angle of a wall less than half a dozen yards distant, and the Captain failed to discover the watcher. Convinced that no one was observing them, the clever villain stepped close up to the door and gave four peculiar taps upon it with his knuckles. After a brief delay bolts were heard to slide back in their sockets, and the door was opened two or three inches, and a low voice inside said,

“What’s wanted?”

“I want admittance for myself and a friend.”

“Who are you?”

“Number One.”

At these words the door was flung wide open, and the unseen speaker was seen on the sill—a small, misshapen man, whose figure was scarcely visible against the dark background of the passage beyond.

“All right,” he said cheerily. “Come in, Captain.”

Captain Lavern entered the doorway, and Ned followed, the figure closing the door behind them.

Let us now turn our attention to the figure we saw following Ned and his villainous guide—the figure that had dropped into an angle of the wall so suddenly when the two

men had halted before the door of the old public-house. Fifteen or twenty minutes went by and still the figure stood squeezed into the angle of the wall, waiting patiently, evidently to make sure that the two men would not come out again. At last it moved slightly, drew a deep breath, and crept out to the sidewalk once more, where it stopped. At this moment a ray of light from the window of an adjoining house fell upon the face, and revealed that of Hero Dalton.

Why was she here, and at this hour of the night? Hero's heart was given up to Ned. He had saved her from a fate worse than death, and she was more than grateful. She dreaded Captain's Lavern's influence over the young man, and she had determined to save him at whatever hazard to herself. She had discovered from Ned the time and place where he was to meet Lavern the cracksman, and had reached the underground saloon before them. We have seen how she had tracked them from the door of the saloon to the place they entered.

For some minutes after Ned and Captain Lavern had disappeared within the house, she found herself incapable of motion; but her strength came back to her at last, and she stepped upon the sidewalk and approached the door.

It was closed and secured on the inside, as in the first instance. She recalled the nature of the four peculiar raps Captain Lavern had given, and imitated them as exactly as possible. The effect was magical. Back shot the bolts, open swung the door, and she was questioned precisely as those who had entered in advance of her had been. In the face of all these dangers she became calm, cool, resolute. Only for an instant did she hesitate.

"Push ahead, young woman," said the voice of the dwarf, for it was he again who stood at the door. "Don't keep me standing here all night."

She entered a hall so dark and dismal that it was impos-

sible for one not accustomed to the place to find their way along the hall after the closed door had shut out the uncertain light of the alley. Her heart throbbed loud and fast with fear, but she managed to maintain her self-possession, and said in a quiet voice,

“I can’t see my way in this miserable place.”

“Catch hold of my hand, my girl. I can find my way in the dark.”

Shudderingly she obeyed. The dwarf’s cold fingers coiled round her own like the coils of a snake, and he led her along what seemed in the darkness to be a winding passage.

“Who are you, my duck?” he questioned as they proceeded. “I couldn’t see your face very well at the door, of course, but your voice is strange.”

“I’m a friend of the man you let in about half an hour since,” she answered.

“Captain Lavern?”

Hero was compelled to return an affirmative answer, though she really had referred to Ned.

“Ha, ha!” chuckled the dwarf, contemptuously. “I reckon you told the truth. Any number of young women come here to see Captain Lavern. He’s the devil of a fellow among the petticoats, he is.”

Hero wisely remained silent.

The dwarf suddenly drew nearer.

“Take care! Here are the steps, remember.”

She counted ten of them. At the top her guide suddenly pushed open a door, ushered her into a lighted room, in which three or four persons were sitting at a table playing cards. While she stood hesitating and half blinded by the sudden light, a familiar voice cried out, close to her elbow,

“Lord bless us and save us, if it ain’t Miss Dalton!”

It was the voice of the girl Nancy, the one who had as-

sisted the robbers to effect an entrance to the Hall, and whom Hero had allowed to escape afterward.

Hero turned to speak to her, but at that instant there was a rush of feet in her direction, and she heard several voices shout angrily in concert,

“A spy! a spy! Knife her! d—— her, somebody! Don’t let her escape!”

CHAPTER X.

A FRIEND IN NEED.

“KILL her! kill her!” yelled the angry voices close to her ear. “Who let her in?”

Nancy came to her relief, interposing her own slight form between our heroine and the angry mob that menaced her.

“Back with you!” cried the intrepid girl. “Why are you in such a fury? I know the young woman, and will answer for her she is no spy.”

“Oh,” said a voice, “she’s a friend of yours, Nancy?”

“Yes,” she answered boldly, “a friend of mine.”

“And a new member?”

“Of course. Clear out, will you, and leave her alone?”

The moment they departed, Nancy turned around and, looking eagerly at Hero, said in a whisper,

“In heaven’s name, why are you here?”

“I followed Ned Bachman. I thought some harm was intended him.”

A strange smile flitted over the girl’s sullen face.

“You are mad,” she muttered. “You must go back this instant. I’ll let you out.”

“I must see and speak to Mr. Bachman before I go.”

"You cannot. Come with me. In another minute it will be too late."

She attempted to drag Hero to the door by which she had entered, but the latter pushed off her clinging hands.

"I'm not afraid; and I will not go until I see Ned."

"You don't know what you say," whispered Nancy, excitedly. "You can't guess what sort of place you are in. You will be murdered if you are discovered here. So sure as my name's Nancy, I'm telling you the truth."

"You would help me to escape?"

"Yes."

"Why are you so very anxious?"

"Because I like you. You were good and kind to me after that little affair at the Hall, and I don't forget it. Only say you'll go, and I'll let you out, if they flay me alive for it."

"They are a part of the Black Band of whom you told me that night at the Hall?"

"Yes, they are; and they'll be down on you in a moment if you don't leave."

All the time they had been talking three or four scowling men had been glaring at them from one side of the room, and now, as if moved by common impulse, they came rushing up to them again.

"You've lied to us, Nancy. That young woman ain't no pal of ours. She's a spy. You're trying to help her off."

They gathered around Hero, and were about to drag Nancy away from her, when a door opened near the other end of the apartment, and a new actor appeared upon the scene. He strode forward with a hasty, impatient step.

"What's the meaning of this disturbance?" he said, in a loud, angry tone of voice.

Then the circle parted, and Hero found herself face to face with Eugene Barton.

"Well met, Miss Dalton," he said, bowing low.

She answered nothing. At first she seemed to have been stricken dumb.

"I was longing to see you, my charmer," he said insolently, "and presto! here you are. How did you get in here? Explain the mystery, I entreat."

For answer she disdainfully averted her face.

"This lady is my prize," he said, turning to the assembled group, "and I wish you all to distinctly understand as much. Fall back, there, every one of you! I'll not have her interfered with by any one of you."

"She'll peach on us," said one man, doggedly.

"No, she wo'nt do anything of the sort. I will personally answer for all the harm that befalls the band by means of her. Where is Peggy?"

"Here I am," said one of the women, stepping forward.

"I wish to speak with you."

The two stepped to one side and conversed in whispers for a few moments. At the close of the conference they approached Hero and placed themselves on either side of her.

"You are to go with us," said Barton, briefly.

"Where?"

She lifted her eyes in helpless appeal as she asked this question.

"Come, and you will find out."

She recoiled and attempted to break away from the strong hands that held her.

"For God's sake, don't detain me here!" she cried in a tone of piteous appeal. "I must find Ned Bachman. I must save him from the man that is plotting his ruin."

Barton turned upon her with a savage leer.

"So that's your game, eh?" he said, between his teeth. "I just comprehend the motive that brought you to this place."

Then with ready insolence he threw his arm around her

waist and dragged her towards the door by which he had just entered the apartment. Hero ceased to struggle, ceased to plead with him, for she saw how useless it would be to do either.

Peggy pushed on ahead up a flight of stairs and along a gloomy passage, from the far end of which a door with a massive lock might be seen. Barton followed close behind her, his vise-like grip still fastened on Hero's arm.

"Do you see what I'm going to do with you?" he whispered. "You are to be shut up in yonder apartment until you are ready to yield yourself to me. Bachman isn't here to help you, either. The people who frequent this house are my friends. You have nothing to expect from them, nothing from my clemency, if you will not submit. Now, go in. I shall leave you for a little while to reflect upon your situation."

He pushed her over the threshold of the room, the door of which Peggy had opened and stood leaning against, waiting for Hero to pass through.

"Peggy will be your jailer," said Barton, turning to depart; "and it will avail you nothing to appeal to her for help."

Hero caught hold of his sleeve just as the door was about to close between them.

"Answer me one question," she cried in an eager tone of voice. "Is Ned Bachman under this roof at the present moment?"

"Yes, he is."

"Will he be suffered to depart in safety?"

"That remains to be seen."

Barton swung on his heel, and then for the last time turned to address her.

"Let me tell you something to quiet your mind," he said, with a mocking laugh. "You should not make Bachman's goings and comings any concern of yours, as he

is engaged to be married to Hortense de Noir," and he closed and locked the door.

CHAPTER XI.

IN THE COILS.

WHEN Ned Bachman entered the passage with Captain Lavern, as recounted in a former chapter, he was not a little daunted by the profound silence and darkness all around.

"Don't be frightened," whispered his companion; "we'll soon be out of this place and have a light. Keep hold of my hand and don't stumble."

"Where are we?" Ned asked sharply. "This is not a private house."

"Hush! mum is the word, my boy. For your own interest you'd better keep a quiet tongue in your head."

"For my own interest?" repeated Ned.

"Yes. In short, you might be heard by those who would not be restrained by ties of blood from offering personal violence," and Captain Lavern laughed maliciously.

Ned stopped. "I shall go no farther with you. Father," he said, "I shall go from this villainous place at once. Lead the way back again and open the door."

"Now, my son, I'll give you a pointer. Once having passed that door you cannot return until I am ready to have you, and that's not yet."

"Good God!" cried Ned. "Are you, my father, capable of treachery toward your son?"

"By no means," was the villain's ready reply. "I merely wish you to get a glimpse of my present mode of living. It will prove a novel experience for you, my boy."

Captain Lavern's motives in bringing the young man to the den of the Black Band—for the old public-house was, for the time being, the headquarters of that honorable community—were of the basest and most sinister sort. He reasoned that Ned's position in society would render him a most desirable and powerful ally in future schemes of villainy and pillage, could his principles be successfully undermined. During a portion of the time occupied in this conversation they had stood just without the door. Hero Dalton entered some twenty minutes later. The dwarf, who was guiding them, stood with his hand on the door knob, a silent listener. The Captain now turned to him.

“Have many arrived, Mansauel?” he asked.

“Nearly all, Captain,” was the respectful answer.

“Good. That will do, my fine fellow. You may go back to your post again.”

The dwarf flung open the door, and then retreated along the dark passage. Captain Lavern and Ned entered the lighted apartment. There were three or four persons assembled there at this time. These persons eyed Ned curiously.

“The Captain's picked up a new fall,” was the whisper that ran around the room. “He's one of the nobs, too, I reckon.”

Captain Lavern took no notice whatever of these remarks. He passed through the room without a word, still keeping Ned at his side, and went out by the door at the lower end. At the foot of a stairway they seemed to be confronted by the solid wall; but Captain Lavern took a step or two in front of his companion, and touched a part of the wall which seemed as solid as the rest, when what appeared to be a barrier of solid masonry rolled backward, leaving an aperture wide enough for any ordinary-sized person to gain admittance. Beyond this opening could be

seen a large-sized chamber, evidently underground, for the ceiling was supported by numerous iron columns. This room was half filled with persons of both sexes, who were seated at numerous tables which were scattered here and there about the apartment. They were waiting for some person of importance to arrive. Ned recoiled from this scene with an expression of utter amazement depicted on his face.

"What is the meaning of all this?" he asked, turning to the Captain.

"It means," said the Captain, with his usual chuckle, "that the Black Band is in session."

Ned saw that he had been tricked, and by the man who claimed to be his father. He fully realized the deadly peril that menaced him. There he stood, single-handed and alone, confronting the largest and most dangerous band of criminals known in the annals of crime—an organization so powerful that justice could not reach it. And worse than all the rest—his father had by foul and wicked deception enticed him into this terrible place. At this instant several of the persons nearest the door caught sight of the newcomers, and a shout of welcome arose which was repeated from all sides of the room.

"Here's the Captain! Hurrah for Captain Lavern!"

Ned started as these words reached his ear, and looked sharply at his companion.

"You are not the head of these cut-throats?" he asked in a low, eager tone of voice.

"Wait and you'll see," growled the Captain.

He pushed forward into the room without waiting to say anything further. A motley group immediately surrounded him. Nearly every nation under the sun had its representative, each one more villainous-looking than the other. A haggard, blear-eyed woman of thirty, who must once have been handsome, but who was now only a horri-

ble wreck, pushed a glass into his hand and clinked the rim of a second one against it.

"Let's drink together, Captain," she said in a maudlin voice. "Let's drink and be merry. I've been waiting for you."

"All right, Nell," he said good-humoredly, taking the glass as he spoke. "Here's to the success of our band."

"Good-evening, Mr. Lavern," said a cool, placid voice.

Ned turned with an involuntary start of surprise. Eugene Barton stood at his elbow.

"Have I disturbed your equanimity?" inquired the malicious villain, mockingly. "You scarcely expected to meet me in such a place, I presume, when you last saw me in Arlington Street."

Ned surveyed the *roue* in silent contempt.

"It was not in Arlington Street I last saw you," he said after a brief silence.

"Where then?"

"In the gardens of Briarmere, after you had locked Mademoiselle de Noir and myself in the tower."

The shot told. Barton's face flushed, and he bit his lip angrily.

"I was never at Briarmere," he began.

"Don't trouble yourself to make any denial," said Ned, quietly; "your face betrays you. I was not certain whether you were the person or not I saw there until this evening. Now I am convinced beyond a doubt."

"Let us not quarrel," said Barton. "To be sure, I owe you a grudge for the ill turn you served me in Arlington Street that night, but I am willing to forget the past if you are. Here's my hand."

Ned drew back.

"I prefer you an avowed enemy rather than a treacherous friend."

Barton's face was that of a lurking devil at that moment.

There was treachery in his fawning manner and conciliating smiles. Ned saw the cloven foot and took care not to meet it half way.

"As you please," said the baffled rogue, turning on his heel. "I shall make no further overtures for your friendship."

And he hastily quitted the room. He had scarcely gone, when several of the band, who had been listening to the above conversation, quickly surrounded Ned.

"Are you one of us?" asked a burly ruffian with a head like a bull-dog.

"No," Ned replied boldly.

"You're going to join us?"

"No, I am not."

This answer raised a hoot of execration, and they rushed at Ned in a body, drawing knives and revolvers, and would, no doubt, have ended the story at that moment had not Captain Lavern come to the rescue of our hero.

"Hands off!" he yelled, facing the excited crowd, a revolver in each hand. "This man is my son—my own flesh and blood; do you hear? And the first man that touches him dies."

There was a brief silence.

"He must take the oath, Captain," said the man who had first spoken.

"Yes, yes; the oath," was echoed in the dogged accents of men who had life and liberty at stake and were determined to run no risks.

The Captain put his lips to Ned's ear.

"You must submit," he whispered, "or even *my* power will be insufficient to save you from their fury."

"Let me say a word to them myself."

He stepped forward, confronting the savage throng.

"Listen," he said in quiet, subdued tones that commanded attention even from the savage throng that sur-

rounded him. "I came here with no suspicions of the character of the persons I was to meet. The secret of your place of rendezvous I have unwittingly discovered. Under the existing circumstances I am willing to be bound by an oath, but I will not become a member of your band."

"What oath, then?" was asked.

"I will swear never to reveal what I have seen here this night. I do not take that oath to save my life, but for his sake," and he pointed to Captain Lavern. "I could not betray him whether bound by an oath or not."

A death-like silence fell upon the crowd. The men looked at one another and then at Ned, but no one spoke. His appearance and manly words had evidently quelled the excitement of the brutes around him. At last Captain Lavern spoke.

"Let him have his own way in this matter," he said. "I'll answer for him"

A Bible was produced from some out-of-the-way corner, and the oath administered. Ned swore never to betray the Black Band, and never to assist to bring any of its members, as members, to judgment.

The drinking and carousing were resumed. Presently Ned noticed that Eugene Barton had returned to the room. In a moment the men stood face to face with each other.

"I know what has happened," said Barton. "You are a member of the Black Band."

"I am not."

"You have taken the oath."

"Not to betray you."

"Bah!" said Barton, sneeringly. "Don't put too fine a point on that, my lad. If the police were to pounce upon us at this moment, do you think you would be held less guilty than the rest of us?"

"Yes," said the voice of Captain Lavern close behind him. "You now stand convicted, my boy. Our interests are

your interests; our ruin would be ruin to yourself. The Black Band never lose their hold on any person who comes within their circle. You are as much bound to us as if you had taken the oath of membership to the band."

"I shall never league myself with such infamous society," cried Ned, indignantly, "and it is useless to attempt to persuade me that I have already become a member."

"You may be led to change your mind," insinuated Barton.

"Never."

He turned his back on the tempter.

"Father," he said, addressing Captain Lavern, "I'm going to leave this wretched place. Will you come with me?"

The Captain hesitated an instant, looked at Barton significantly, spoke in an undertone to two or three of the band, and then returned to where Ned was standing.

"Come on, my boy," he said at last, moving towards the door. "I'll go with you."

The two men quitted the room and the house together.

CHAPTER XII.

HERO A PRISONER.

MEANWHILE how fared it with Hero Dalton? Her first care after the door had closed on Barton and the old hag, his companion, was to inspect the apartment; but it afforded no hope of escape. It only contained one window, and that had heavy iron bars on the outside, and only the door by which she had entered, that was fastened by a massive lock on the outside. The room had been evidently built expressly for prisoners, and her case seemed hopeless.

About nine o'clock of the ensuing morning the old

woman made her appearance, bringing in some breakfast on a neatly-arranged tray.

Hero at once addressed her. "Why am I detained here a prisoner?" she asked.

"You know already, I reckon," sneered the hag. "Barton is smitten with your pretty face; and you are a little too coy when you have your liberty."

Convulsive shuddering shook the poor girl's frame.

"I know he seeks to detain me here. I have scorned his love, and now he would dishonor me."

"That's about the long and short of it, I reckon," was the coarse reply.

A cry of utter abhorrence and disgust broke from Hero's pale lips.

"And you, a woman, are willing to aid and abet him in his baseness!" she exclaimed. "Oh, shame on you! Shame! shame!"

The hag only laughed and shrugged her shoulders,

"Oh, madam," cried Hero, beseechingly, "aid me to escape from this vile place. Your heart cannot be wholly hardened. Have pity on my youth and innocence."

"I can't help you. If I did they would murder me."

"Oh, for the love of heaven, hear me. Though poor and unknown myself, I have influential friends who will reward you for restoring me to them—I am sure they will."

"Bah! Let 'em keep their money. Barton pays me well for keeping you here."

"Miserable woman, will nothing move you?"

"No, it won't," replied Peggy. "Barton has given me my orders, and I have got to obey them."

She turned to leave the room. "You'll eat your breakfast, and be a sensible girl, and be ready to receive your lover when he comes to see you."

"Is he coming here to-day?"

"I don't know. He may come at any moment. Take a fool's advice, my dear, and put on your sweetest smiles to welcome him, or you may regret it."

And, with a sardonic grin on her ugly and wrinkled countenance, the hag disappeared.

Left alone, Hero had plenty of time to reflect upon her condition.

"I have nothing to hope," she thought. "None of my friends know that I am detained here. When I set out from the Hall to follow Ned, I told no one what I was going to do. They will miss me, but will not know how to direct a search."

She sat for many minutes with her face buried in her hands. At last she was roused by the sound of cautious footsteps moving across the hall without, and the sharp clicking of the key as the door was unlocked. Then the door was opened very slowly and carefully, and an ugly, misshapen figure stole carefully into the room. It was Mansauel, the dwarf who had let her into the house the previous evening.

Hero now looked at the dwarf more closely than she had done before. He had a coarse, sensual face, with thick lips and small twinkling gray eyes. These eyes now fastened themselves upon her with a glance that fairly chilled her blood. She shook off the horror his presence inspired, however, and approached him.

"Have you come to help me to escape from this place?" she asked in a trembling voice.

"That depends."

He leered at her, threw a hasty glance over his shoulder towards the passage behind him, and finally caught hold of her hand.

"You don't like Barton?" he asked.

"I hate him."

"Good." Those cunning eyes twinkled more rapidly

than ever. "I suspected as much from what I saw last night."

"And you have come to save me. Oh, may Heaven bless you!"

"Fair lady, it would be worth any sacrifice to earn your gratitude."

He was pressing closer and closer to her side; and before she could prevent it he had raised her hand to his lips. Despite every effort at self-control, she recoiled and uttered a sharp cry. A sudden stifling fear took possession of her heart.

"What do you mean?" she faltered. "I do not know what to make of your actions."

"They mean, charming lady, that I love you."

"You love me?" repeated Hero, with a sinking heart.

"Fondly, devotedly."

She comprehended the scoundrel's true character at last.

"You don't believe me," he said, leering at her in a most fulsome manner.

"How did you gain admittance to this room," she asked, moving away from him.

"Oh, I possess a duplicate key. In any event, bolts and bars could not have kept me away from you."

"What do you propose to do?"

"Let you escape from this house on one condition."

"What is that?"

"That I go with you wherever you go."

"You!" she echoed.

It was impossible to misunderstand his terrible meaning.

"Oh, just Heaven!" she cried.

"I risk my life in coming here," he went on rapidly. "I risk it again in making such a proposition to you. The Black Band punish deserters with death. But I risk even death to bask in the sunshine of your smiles. We will go far from here where they cannot trace us. Choose," he

cried, seeing that she remained silent. "If you remain here you will be Barton's mistress; if you escape with me you will go as my wife. What say you? Will you go?"

"Never!" cried Hero in a loud, clear voice. "Leave me. I will accept no service at your hands that must be paid for so dearly. Go!"

A horrible oath dropped from his lips. He strode towards her with both his arms outstretched.

"Girl!" he snarled, "you shall repent ever having spoken those words to me."

The next instant his arms were about her, and his hot breath scorched her cheek.

CHAPTER XIII.

A CLUE.

It was near morning when Ned Bachman reached home after quitting the den of the Black Band. The servants had retired, and letting himself in with a latch-key, he immediately retired to his room, there to seek repose. It was at a late hour in the afternoon when he awoke from his vision-haunted slumber. He noticed an unusual bustle in the lower part of the house. Hastily dressing himself, he descended the stairs and was met by his uncle George.

Mr. Bachman seemed disturbed and agitated. He turned sharply around on hearing Ned's step on the stairs.

"Is it you?" he cried out. "The servants told me you were away all night and had not yet returned."

"I came back early this morning, and let myself in with a latch-key."

"I am glad you are here."

He said this with such evident fervor, and drew such a deep breath of relief, as convinced Ned that something serious was amiss.

"What has happened?" he asked.

"Miss Dalton is not in the house."

Ned started like one shot.

"Not in the house? What do you mean?"

"Precisely what I say."

"Good heavens!"

"None of the servants saw her go away. But she must have left last night, for her bed was untouched. But she was not missed until this morning, however."

"Why was I not told of this this morning?"

"It was not known that you were in the house, remember. Besides—"

"Well?" said Ned, impatiently, seeing that his uncle hesitated.

"To be frank, I thought you had gone with her."

"I?" gasped Ned.

"What else could I think? I knew that you had grown quite fond of each other. You were both missing, as I thought; and Miss Dalton might be the most unprincipled adventuress in all the world, for aught I knew to the contrary."

"That poor, innocent girl an adventuress? Never! How could you think of anything so vile of her?"

"Bah! She could never have been abducted from this house, and its inmates remain ignorant of the fact."

Ned dropped his head in his hands. A sudden suspicion flashed across his mind like lightning. Hero knew of his appointment with Captain Lavern the evening before. She followed him once to such a meeting, feeling solicitous for his personal safety. Was it possible that she could have followed him a second time and thus have fallen into the hands of her enemies? Eugene Barton was a

member of the Black Band, and he had been present at the meeting of that villainous order on the previous evening. Was the poor girl in the clutches of this scoundrel again? The mere thought made the perspiration stand out on his forehead like beads.

"I have an inkling of the truth perhaps," he said presently. "At any rate, it is a clue, and I shall follow it out."

Mr. Bachman looked at him in amazement.

"Explain yourself," he said.

The young man shook his head.

"I cannot explain it—at least, not yet. Do not ask me."

"Good heavens!" catching his breath sharply. "You arouse the strongest suspicions in my mind. I believe my misguided brother must be mixed up somehow in this affair."

Ned remained silent.

"Speak!" cried Mr. Gwyne, eagerly grasping his hand. "Have you seen your father since that night he came here?"

"Yes."

"Where is he now?"

"I cannot tell you. Wicked as he is, he is still my father. Let us not talk of him, Uncle George. I must find Hero Dalton, and there is no time to be lost. Some time I may have something to tell you, but not now. All my thoughts must be given to that persecuted girl."

"You persist in thinking she is detained away from the Hall against her will?"

"Certainly I do. I shall go in search of her, and leave no stone unturned to find her," said Ned, resolutely.

"Go, by all means. If you need money, you may call at my banker's; they will let you have any reasonable sum."

Ned's first care was to question the servants. But no information could be gleaned from them, beyond the fact that Miss Dalton must have left before the house was closed

the night before. No one had seen her depart, no one had known that she contemplated going away. Assured that nothing was to be gained by staying at the Hall, he departed for the city, resolutely bent on following out the suspicion that had occurred to his mind.

After arriving in the city Ned sauntered about the streets for a long time, uncertain what course to pursue. Had he better make a confidant of Captain Lavern and ask his assistance? Even if he were to do so, could he feel assured that his pretended father would serve him faithfully? It was doubtful, to say the least. The captain of the Black Band had shown himself to be a wholly unprincipled man. And again, the villainous society to which he belonged might compel him to serve Barton's interests, rather than those of an outsider, no matter what inducements might be offered on the other side. On the whole, he thought it would be just as well to trust to his unaided efforts. It did not seem advisable to venture near the old building until after the shades of night had fallen; so he wandered on and on through the crowded streets, in a state of mind bordering on desperation.

"Heavens!" he muttered, pressing his hands over his heart. "How madly I have learned to love that girl! This misfortune that has befallen her tells me in a manner not to be mistaken how dear she has become to me. And good God! I have promised to marry another woman."

Night fell at last. He waited until the city clocks had tolled the hour of eleven. Then he bent his footsteps in the direction of the old public-house in the alley. It was not the dwarf who made his appearance on this occasion, but Ned, nevertheless, was immediately admitted to the pitch-dark passage. Groping his way along, he finally reached the ante-room, the door of which stood slightly ajar. He went in without an instant's hesitation. Peggy, the old hag into whose charge, it will be remembered,

Hero had been given on her entrance into the den, sat at one of the tables near the opposite end of the room, shuffling a pack of greasy cards. Two or three men were grouped around her, among whom was Mansauel, the dwarf. Ned observed that the latter looked sullen and ill-natured, and that a livid welt was traced from the top to the bottom of his left cheek, as if some one had dealt him a heavy blow.

Peggy merely nodded to our hero, but did not rise from her seat.

"It's the pal, boys," she said, spreading out her cards on the table. "Don't mind him."

At this instant some object rose up at the old woman's feet from off the floor, where it had been lying like some faithful watch-dog. An involuntary cry broke from Ned's lips as he gazed upon it.

The object was a girl, and the girl was Nancy. Until now, he had not seen her since she had disappeared from his uncle's house on the night of the attempted burglary.

"Nancy!" he cried, "you here?"

Her expression became more appealing than ever.

"Hush!" she cried.

Still he did not heed her.

"I am seeking Miss Dalton," he said eagerly and impatiently. "She has disappeared from the Hall. If she is in this house, I entreat you to tell me where to find her."

"Hush!" she said again, just above her breath. This time she made a swift, significant gesture in the direction of the table where Peggy and her companions were sitting. Ned glanced that way and encountered the little red eyes of Mansauel, the dwarf, fixed upon his face in a most expressive and malignant stare. He felt sure that he had heard every word he had spoken. Nancy dropped her ragged handkerchief at Ned's feet and stooped to recover it.

"Take care," she said, in a scarcely audible tone of voice.

"We are watched. I'll see you, and have a talk with you by and by if possible."

She rose up and went spinning away like a top to the other side of the room, where she dropped upon the floor again, curled herself up and remained perfectly still. "She evidently knows something about Hero," thought Ned. "I can tell as much from her peculiar manner. The poor girl, beyond a doubt, is held a prisoner somewhere in this old rookery; and I believe Nancy is inclined to be a friend to me. At any rate I'll trust her." He had scarcely come to this conclusion, when the door of the passage to the underground room was suddenly opened, and a young lady advanced into the apartment. Ned saw the new-comer, caught his breath sharply, and then stood still in his tracks as if spell-bound.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE BEAUTIFUL PLOTTER.

THE woman before him was Hortense de Noir.

Henry struggled with the spell that held him in thrall, broke it at last, and slowly approached her.

"Hortense!" he cried.

Her surprise at this meeting was manifestly greater than Ned's.

"Good heavens!" she muttered, in a stifled voice.

He caught her hand almost roughly. "What does this mean, Hortense? Why are you here?"

She was silent, and began to tremble.

"Do you know the character of this place?"

"No, no," she answered with difficulty.

"Then let me tell you. Only the vilest of the vile come

here. The men are burglars and thieves; the women worse than the men, if possible."

"God forbid!"

"It is true," he ejaculated earnestly. "Come away from this devil's hole. Quick, quick! It is death, moral death, to breathe its pestilential atmosphere."

Strengthening every nerve to meet the dangerous situation in which she found herself,—dangerous to her designs on Ned's hand and fortune we mean—Hortense confronted him with all traces of her recent emotions banished from her brow.

"I run no risk," she said, "and shall linger in this place until you depart."

"You know not what indignities these brutes will heap upon you."

"Do I not? I did not tell you the truth just now. The character of this place is known to me. Why not? Have not I been the companion of thieves all my life?"

She spoke in accents of concentrated bitterness. Ah, what a consummate actress she was!

"You don't mean to tell me that there is any link between the frequenters of Briarmere and the Black Band?"

"The chain of wickedness is a long one, and has many links," she answered.

"I see, I see."

"You are not vexed with me for coming?"

"Why did you come to this infamous place?"

For an instant the woman was staggered. She was there at the present time for the purpose of meeting Barton, and had no thought of meeting Ned. But of course she could not acknowledge as much to the young man who believed so implicitly in her truth and purity.

For an instant, we say, she was at her wits' end for an answer to Ned's question. But she soon saw the way clear of her difficulty.

"I can explain what brought me here to-night," she said, dropping her eyes in modest confusion.

"Will you?"

"I came to seek *you*," she faltered.

"To seek me?"

"Yes."

"Why should you expect to meet me here?"

"You were here last night."

"How knew you that?"

"Alas! have you forgotten the class of people that surround me at Briarmere. As I said before, the chain of iniquity is long. It was very easy for me to know what happened here last night."

"But why did you come to seek me here?"

"I feared you would be attracted here a second time, and—and I wished to save you."

She blushed rosy-red in making this assertion. This Circe usually had even the expression of her face under perfect control.

"Let me tell you the object that brought me to this house to-night. A young lady, Hero Dalton, has been stopping at the Hall for some days."

"I have heard of her," said Hortense, biting her lip.

"She thought she owed me a debt of gratitude for some fancied service, and, believing I was to come here last night to meet some desperate character, I have every reason to think she followed me secretly, with the hope of being of service to me."

"Indeed!"

"Miss Dalton has enemies. She has been missing from the Hall since last night, and I fear was discovered by some of her enemies and detained."

"Detained where?"

"Perhaps in this very house."

“What reason have you to believe that Miss Dalton is held a prisoner in this house?”

“Her worst enemy, Eugene Barton, is a frequenter of this den of villains.”

“Ah!”

Only a word; but from Hortense de Noir's lips it expressed volumes. She was silent for a moment, with eyes slowly scanning Ned's face.

“Why should the person of whom you speak persecute Miss Dalton?” she asked.

“Because he is a libertine and seeks her dishonor.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes; I know the villain well. Many a pure and innocent maiden has become, through his vile arts, a creature I should blush to name to you.”

Hortense's regard for Barton had scarcely been weakened by this new *penchant* for Ned Bachman, but she had an eye to her own interest. Eugene, being a married man, was beyond her reach. By marrying Ned she at once gained a footing in society and insured a future above the wants and necessities of her present mode of life.

Hortense stifled the thought that was passing through her mind, and said abruptly,

“I have the range of these premises. If Miss Dalton is here as you suspect, I will find out where she is detained and set her free. I will go at once. Do you remain here until I can return and report to you.”

She turned and hastily quitted the apartment. Ned stood silent and thoughtful. In spite of himself, a vague distrust of Hortense *would* creep into his mind. In the midst of these reflections, the girl Nancy rose from her seat in the corner and walked toward the door, pressing close to him as she went.

“Beware of her,” she whispered as she passed him. “She's a devil and doesn't like Miss Dalton.”

Then she glided stealthily from the room.

Nobody save Mansauel observed her departure. But he, as was perfectly manifest to Ned, took notice of everything that transpired around him. His keen gray eyes kept steadily at the work of espionage.

Ned repeated the girl's words over and over again to himself. Had Nancy good and sufficient reasons for warning him against Hortense, or was it some strange freak of the wild girl's?

The minutes rolled on until at least a half-hour had elapsed, and still Hortense did not return. Ned grew restless, and, at last when he could bear the anxiety and suspense no longer, he determined to go in search of her, regardless of her request to the contrary.

She had passed out by the door of the passage leading to the underground room, the meeting-place of the Black Band on the night before; and Ned started in the same direction, in quest of her. He had barely entered the long corridor-like passage, however, when he came face to face upon Captain Lavern.

The clever villain recoiled a pace or two when he recognized our hero. But his agitation was but momentary. "Delighted to see you, my boy," he said, only extending the tips of two fingers.

"I wish the pleasure were mutual," said Ned, bluntly.

"Why are you here, then?" asked Captain Lavern with ready assurance. "You're one of us now, in spite of fate and the parson, my lad. It's no use kicking against the pricks. You had better go in with us heart and soul, and be a jolly fellow among the rest."

"Is that why you enticed me here in the first place—to make me as bad as your vile crew?"

Captain Lavern winced.

"Never mind why, my dear son," he said airily, after a brief struggle with himself. "Wait here a minute if you

don't wish to go below. I have only to give some directions to Peggy, and I'll join you again."

He turned the door-knob and passed into the apartment Ned had just quitted, carefully closing the door behind him. He had scarcely disappeared when the young man heard flying feet come down the dimly lighted passageway, and an instant later the girl Nancy stood before him, panting and breathless.

"It is you," she cried eagerly, "thank the stars. I was looking for you. Quick, follow me!"

"What have you discovered?"

"Quick, come on! I'll tell you as we go."

Ned looked at her sharply. She might be leading him into some secret snare.

"Tell me where you wish to take me," he said in a low, stern voice, catching her arm in a vise-like grip.

CHAPTER XV.

JUST IN TIME.

IN the previous chapter we left poor Hero struggling in the arms of Mansauel, the dwarf. Her very soul seemed to die within her when she felt his loathsome breath on her cheeks, and caught the glassy, gloating look in his red-gray eyes.

"Mercy! mercy!" she gasped

"Ha, ha!" he chuckled. "You see now that it is dangerous to defy me. I shall claim a kiss as a just reward for those naughty words, just now."

In another instant his polluted lips would have been quaffing the sweetness of her own; but at this instant the door was flung open and Eugene Barton strode into the room.

He struck the dwarf a stinging blow across the cheek with the light cane he carried.

"D—n you!" hissed Mansauel, glaring at Barton with all the fierceness of an infuriated wild beast. "I'll have your life for that blow! Mark my words."

"Go!" said Barton, authoritively. "I have no wish to measure strength with you. Go, before I am tempted to beat you to a jelly."

"I will go," he said at last, thinking discretion the better part of valor. "But this affair does not end here; remember that!" and gnashing his teeth in disappointed rage, he quitted the apartment.

When the dwarf had disappeared, Barton turned to the trembling girl.

"Don't be afraid," he said soothingly. "You are safe now."

"Safe—with you?" she gasped.

She shuddered, and shrank closer against the wall. Had she escaped the embrace of one scoundrel only to be made the victim of another?

"You needn't be frightened," Barton resumed, correctly interpreting the movement she had made. "I am not here at the present time to make love to you, agreeable as the task would be. I've brought you a visitor."

He stepped to the door as he spoke, and signed for some one waiting in the passage to enter. A young and beautiful woman advanced immediately into the room.

"Miss Dalton," said Barton, politely, "let me present to you Miss Hortense de Noir."

Hero stared at her beautiful visitor in unfeigned astonishment, and found that her scrutiny was returned with equal earnestness.

"Ned Bachman's betrothed wife," whispered Barton, close to her ear. "Miss Dalton, will you not shake hands with her?"

Hortense caught the whispered words.

"Yes," she said sweetly; "I am engaged to Mr. Bachman. Did this young lady doubt the fact?"

"Yes, up to this moment, I think," answered Barton. "But she must now be convinced."

His sneering tone vexed Hero beyond all control.

"Why are you here?" she cried haughtily. "What is it to me who or what you are?"

Hortense on her side remained wholly unruffled.

"Since we are both in love with the same man," she answered, "I thought it desirable we should make each other's acquaintance."

Hortense's cool insolence seemed to amuse Barton vastly, for he threw back his head and burst into a fit of laughter.

"Well put, my dear. But you are not likely to remain until the play is played out."

"No; since I shall marry Ned."

"And Miss Dalton?"

"Will be your mistress, if she is not such already."

"Well prognosticated," chuckled Barton.

Hortense advanced a step or two nearer, and fixed her glance upon the burning face of the persecuted girl.

"Miss Dalton, what do you think of your own prospects of success in the game which we are playing?"

Hero made no reply.

"Prospects!" echoed Barton. "Haven't I told you that she has no prospects? Bachman is nothing to her from this time forward. She must make up her mind to submit to me now."

"And the sooner she does that the better it will be for her."

"Of course," and he leered at Hero. "I do not mind telling you that I am much more in love with the man by your side than Ned Bachman," Hortense continued, addressing her remarks to our heroine; "but Eugene has a

wife already, though not a very well-beloved one, and I can't marry him. Ned has no such incumbrance; he can offer me wealth and position; and I covet both, as is very proper for a person in my situation. But you must not think I intend giving up my old lover when I am Ned's wife. By no means. I am not such a prude; therefore I very readily consent to loan Eugene to you for a very short time, feeling assured that he will come back to me again. What do you think of our little game,—all trumps? Admirable, is it not?"

Hero drew away from the infamous woman, her breast heaving and her eyes flashing fire. Hortense took Barton's arm and moved towards the door. On the threshold she paused and looked back.

"Remember our respective destinies, Miss Dalton," were her last taunting words. "I go to be the bride of Ned Bachman. You remain as the mistress of Eugene Barton."

Then the door closed, and the infamous couple were gone.

A long, terrible hour wore away. At its close Hero heard the soft patter of cautious footsteps in the passage, and presently a soft, muffled knock sounded on the door. Hero neither spoke nor stirred. The knock was repeated. A futile attempt was made to turn the knob. Then a subdued voice said, through the keyhole,

"Are you there, Miss Dalton?"

It was Nancy. Hero recognized her voice at once, and sprang to her feet, the blood coursing freely in her veins once more.

"Yes, yes," she cried eagerly. "God bless you, my child. You are come to set me free? Oh, tell me that you are."

"Hush," was the whispered answer. "You helped me, dear lady, when I was in trouble, and I'm not ungrateful. I'll do what I can for you."

"Can you not open the door?"

"No; it's locked, and I have not got a key."

"How, then, will you help me to escape?"

"You must have patience, Miss Hero. I haven't laid my plans yet. I only come to bid you hope."

Hero wrung her hands wildly.

"And you will go away again," she moaned despairingly, "leaving me still in the power of these wretches who seek my ruin?"

"I must, if I help you at all. Take heart, Miss Hero, for I promise never to desert you. Good-by. I am going now. I must not be found near this door, or we will both be lost."

Not another word was spoken. Hero knew that the girl was gliding down the stairs again; but for herself, she sat down on the side of her rude couch and buried her face in the pillow. She had sat in the darkness for what seemed an age of horror and expectancy, when a key suddenly grated in the lock, and Eugene Barton again entered the room, followed by two men whose faces were strange to her. He was paler than was his wont, and seemed strangely excited.

"And so you are not in bed?" he said, in a loud, gruff voice. "Good. You and I have a journey to make to-night."

She stared at him in shuddering terror, but could answer nothing.

"Do you hear?" he cried angrily. "Get your bonnet and shawl; there is no time to be lost."

She made no resistance. She was resolved to save her strength for a more propitious moment for escape, should the opportunity offer. She knew there was no use of struggling against these strong men. They passed the first staircase, one of the men walking first with a lighted lantern, and entered a bedroom on the other side of the passage, where a trap-door stood open, the upper rungs of a ladder protruding above the opening. Hero was compelled

to descend this ladder between her two captors. At the foot, Barton suddenly pressed the cold muzzle of a revolver against her temple.

“A single loud noise,” he hissed close to her ear, “and your life is not worth a moment’s purchase.”

CHAPTER XVI.

A SUDDEN JOURNEY.

HERO was like a child in the grasp of the powerful ruffian who held her.

“A single loud cry is enough to seal your doom,” he said again in low, menacing tones.

Suddenly a new and startling suspicion flashed upon her mind. She recovered her power of speech as if by magic. Turning abruptly to her abductor, she said in a sharp whisper,

“Ned Bachman is in this house, and you know it and are afraid that he will discover me.”

“What then?” sneered Barton.

“He is looking for me. That is why you have seen fit to remove me so suddenly.”

The villain laughed tauntingly.

“Would Hortense de Noir allow her lover to play Don Quixote to your forlorn damsel, think you?” he asked sneeringly.

“Am I to have my liberty?”

“When I am done with you,” was the significant answer.

Then turning to the nearest of the two men—the one who carried the lantern—he said,

“You understand your instructions, Jim?”

“Yes.”

He then gave his lantern to his comrade to hold, and then, going to one corner of the room, he picked up a small bundle which he proceeded to fasten by some strong staples into the window-ledge. To her horror and dismay Hero saw that it was a rope-ladder.

Jim now proceeded to raise the window and drop the ladder over the sill. Having accomplished this portion of his work, he approached Hero and attempted to grasp her in his arms. She shrank back.

“It can’t be helped,” said Barton. “You must suffer Jim to take you to the ground. Rest assured, however, that you will be handled with care.” He laughed maliciously. “I will manage to see you very soon again, my charmer,” he said, and attempted to press his lips to her cheek.

She sprang away from him, and Jim caught her in his arms, stepped over the window-sill, and glided easily down the ladder, holding the girl clasped tightly to his breast with one hand while accomplishing his descent. She was now nearly helpless with fright and terror. A third man, who had held the ladder firm while waiting on the pavement below, was ready to receive them the instant the descent was accomplished.

“You’ve got the gal?” he muttered. “All right; we’ll be off the moment Sam joins us.”

He had scarcely ceased speaking when a dark object slid down the rope-ladder into their midst, and the man of whom he had spoken was with them.

By a powerful effort Hero now succeeded in rallying her flagging energies. She looked quickly around her. They were in a narrow and dark alley. A cab stood waiting at the distance of half a dozen yards. Would it be possible to escape—to bring some one to her rescue? With the

sheer madness of despair she resolved to make the attempt. Gathering all her energies for the effort, she struggled to break free from Jim's hold, uttering at the same time a shrill cry for help. The ruffian was too quick for her. His grasp on her arm tightened until his heavy fingers seemed to be sinking into the delicate flesh, and he pressed his disengaged hand over her mouth, stopping further outcry.

"Stop that!" he snarled. "You're clear of Barton's revolver, to be sure; but I've got one that is just as reliable, and I'll use it, too, if you give me any further reason."

She moaned feebly, but attempted no further resistance. It might have been useless to call out in any event, as the alley seemed wholly deserted at that hour of the night. The man Jim lifted her a second time in his powerful arms, bore her to the carriage, thrust her in, then took a seat by her side. His two confederates in crime mounted to the box, and in another instant the cab was rolling rapidly down the alley.

"It' odd you don't like Barton," said Jim, drawing so near her that his rapid breathing sounded fearfully distinct. "He's rich and one of the nobs. He'd make a lady of you, and rig you out in silks and satins. Any other gal would jump at the chance."

"Rich raiment of his providing would suffocate me," murmured Hero.

"Humph! I suppose, then, you'd never think of smiling on a poor devil like me;" and his face, as now seen by the dim light that penetrated the cab from the lamps on either side of the box, was frightfully flushed. "I'd barter my soul for one hug of those dainty arms, one kiss from those tempting lips."

Hero's heart sank like lead in her bosom. She would have fainted outright but for the fact that she would then be wholly at the mercy of this wretch. Her only safety was in an immediate show of firmness. She conquered the

deadly inclination to swoon, and looked the villain steadily in the face.

"How dare you talk to me like that?" she cried angrily. "I shall repeat your words to Mr. Barton, and take care that you are punished for them."

The threat had the desired effect.

"Don't do that, miss," he said earnestly. "I intended no offence, of course. I only thought—"

"Never mind what you thought," interrupted our heroine, with quite a show of dignity. "If I am again offended by your insolent proposals, you will certainly be exposed and brought to punishment."

"Well, you needn't get offended so easily," remarked her crushed adorer.

Hero made no response. She had now leisure to collect her thoughts, and with rare presence of mind she at once began to note from the window of the carriage the direction in which she was being taken. Several of the city streets were passed through in turn, and presently the cab approached the suburbs. To the poor girl's infinite surprise the walls of the home of the Bachmans hove in sight.

"What does this mean?" she thought. "It isn't possible that I am being taken back to the friends who have been so kind to me!"

She instantly saw the folly of such a hope. The cab drove straight past the gate leading into the grounds by which the Hall was surrounded. Only for a short distance, however. Then it entered the gate leading to some other residence, and the wheels of the carriage rolled over a gravel drive for half a dozen rods or so. Then the carriage stopped. The man Sam leaped down from the box and opened the door. "Here we are," he said, assisting Hero to reach the ground. Jim followed her, keeping a fast hold on her arm. The instant her feet touched the ground

she looked up to see the stately walls of Briarmere frowning down upon her hapless self.

Though partially prepared for this by her meeting with Hortense at the den of the Black Band, an involuntary cry rose to Hero's lips. She also experienced a thrill of joy and satisfaction.

"Even though I am detained here a prisoner, it is so very near the Hall that sooner or later the means of communicating with Ned or Mr. Bachman must present themselves."

(I am writing what she thought, remember, not what she said; for she was not in the habit of thinking aloud; nor did I ever know anybody who was.)

Jim, with the air of a person thoroughly familiar with the premises, led her to a private door leading from the terrace. Here he paused and rung the bell. After a brief delay a tall, hard-featured man made his appearance at the door. He nodded familiarly to Jim, but without manifesting the least symptom of surprise at seeing Hero in his company.

"Well, my good fellow," he said, with a slight foreign accent, smiting and rubbing his small white hands together, "what can I do for you this pleasant morning?"

"Here's a letter from Mr. Barton," returned Jim, producing a folded paper from the pocket of his vest. "That talks business, and'll tell you why I'm here, I reckon."

The note must have been a very brief one. But whatever its contents, not a muscle of Monsieur de Noir's (for the stranger was that speculative individual) face changed as he perused it. The instant it was read he crumpled the paper in the hollow of his hand.

"All right," he said in his lively voice. He smiled somewhat significantly. Then turning to Hero, he added: "This is the girl, of course?"

"Yes," answered Jim.

“You may as well come upstairs at once. There are no preparations to be made.”

He led the way up a private staircase, and finally paused before a small open door studded with large nails.

“This is the place,” he said, with a shrug of the shoulders.

Hero, who had been patiently waiting for some opportunity to appeal to Monsieur de Noir for protection from the wretches who were persecuting her so untiringly, felt a sudden revulsion of despair. She realized then, as she might have done sooner, that the mere fact of her being brought to this house was proof positive that she could expect to find neither succor nor friends in such a place.

Monsieur de Noir took her hand and gallantly led her over the threshold of the door, which he had unlocked with a massive key.

“I am here against my will, as you must know perfectly well,” Hero said in a raised voice. “If a man’s heart beat in your breast you will see that I am at once released from the power of wretches who but seek my dishonor.”

“I know nothing of your little affair with Monsieur Barton,” said De Noir, smiling and shrugging his shoulders. “I wish to know nothing. He has requested me as his friend to detain you here for the present.”

Having delivered himself of these words, he bowed low and quitted the apartment, followed by Jim. Then he closed and carefully locked the door behind them.

CHAPTER XVII.

VILLAINY TRIUMPHANT.

NED BACHMAN tightened his hold on the arm of the girl called Nancy as she stood by his side in the dimly-lighted passage.

"Where do you wish to take me?" he said.

"To Hero Dalton," she answered, drawing a deep, half-frightened breath.

Again his stern eyes scanned her face. "You are not seeking to lead me to some spot where I must fall an easy victim to the wretches who frequent this place?"

"No, no, no," cried Nancy, earnestly.

"Hero is in this house?"

"Yes. Make haste or you will be too late to find her. Barton is about to take her away."

Ned still looked puzzled and distrustful. "The power is in the villain's own hands, he said, after a moment's thought. "In this miserable den of thieves he has a score of minions scarcely less infamous than himself, who would of course stand by him."

"You are mistaken," Nancy returned earnestly. "There's less of honor among thieves than some people imagine. Barton would not dare let it be known that he is keeping a young and beautiful girl a prisoner in this house. The Black Band would be afraid to let her remain here and Barton would run the risk of losing his lovely victim, you understand."

Ned shuddered. "Yes, yes," he faltered.

"Do you still distrust me?" asked Nancy, gently touching his arm.

"I will do so no longer."

"Then follow me at once. I fear we have lost too much time already."

She led the way upstairs to the apartment Hero had occupied but a short time since. The door was wide open, and the room dark and still.

"Good heavens," cried the girl, beginning to tremble. "They have taken her away."

"Is she gone?" cried Ned.

"It was in this room that they kept her a prisoner. I expected to find her here."

The young man's heart beat fast with dread unutterable.

"Quick!" he cried. "They cannot be far away. Let us find them."

He darted along the passage. One of the bedroom doors stood open, and within he caught a gleam of light reflected from the ceiling. Without an instant hesitation's he rushed into the apartment.

It was the room containing the trap-door.

Nancy had followed close at his heels. "They made their escape down that trap-door," she cried excitedly. "Follow them, if you will; I dare go no further."

Ned sprang to the ladder and slid down it with the agility of an athlete. The apartment in which he found himself seemed wholly deserted when he first glanced around it; but the window stood wide open, and he ran to it, scarcely knowing why he did so. He looked out upon a dismal alley, where he saw a cab as if waiting for some one. Even as he gazed, three or four dark figures suddenly approached the carriage from under the window where he stood, and lift somebody, evidently a woman, into it.

"Oh, my God!" he cried, "they are indeed taking her away to some new place of infamy."

The thought was maddening. Reckless of all consequences to himself, he prepared to descend from the window by

means of the rope-ladder. At that instant a low, mocking laugh sounded behind him, and a well-known voice hissed in his ear,

"Fool, you have lost all, and my hour of triumph is come at last! Yonder girl is my prize now,—mine, body, and soul, to do with as I see fit."

It was the voice of Barton, who had stood half concealed by the curtains, when Ned had descended so unceremoniously from the chamber above.

Before Ned could turn to confront his inveterate enemy, he received a stunning blow upon the head that knocked him senseless.

Barton planted one foot upon the breast of the fallen man, a sneer of malignant triumph curling his lips.

"Good," he muttered, drawing a dagger from a hidden belt upon his person. "The fellow is stunned, and I'll fix him so he'll never trouble me again."

He drew back his arm for a blow, and would have buried the dagger in the heart of the man he hated, had not a strong hand suddenly arrested his arm and pushed him away from his would-be victim with such force that he reeled up against the wall.

"Damnation!" he snarled, turning suddenly to confront the person that had interfered with his murderous intentions.

It was Captain Lavern, of the Black Band.

"Coward!" cried the Captain, his eyes flashing fire, "would you murder a helpless man?"

A cruel sneer curled Barton's lips. "You are wonderfully scrupulous all at once," he said. "May I inquire the reason?"

Captain Lavern averted his face and seemed more than usually thoughtful. "Whether this young man is my son or not," he said, after a moment's pause, "I have use for

him, and intend to protect him from your murderous assaults."

"Now you are talking to some purpose," answered Barton. "*You have a use* for Ned Bachman! Exactly. That accounts for your interest in him, and your spurious claims upon him. Oh, I understand you, Captain Lavern."

"I'm glad that you understand," said the elder villain coolly, "for it spares me the necessity of beating about the bush."

"Are you going to take me into your confidence?"

"Partially. Of course you know the purpose of the organization of the Black Band?"

"Perfectly well. It is an organized society for carrying on a systematic plan of plundering."

"Well put. Now this man whom you would have killed like a dog may be able to bring a great deal of money into our net. We are sure of one man's wealth through him, at any rate—his uncle, George Bachman."

"Your own brother, according to your own account of yourself."

"Bosh! what matters it if he is? There is very little fraternal love between us. I hate George. He holds a large share of wealth, a portion of which should be mine. Through his nephew, who is also my son, I'm determined to get what is rightfully my own."

"Humph! Before you count too strongly on his aid, I'd advise you to make sure that the blow I dealt him has not put him out of the way altogether."

"Your suggestion is a good one," said Captain Lavern, evincing considerable trepidation as he bent over Ned's motionless figure.

There was a brief silence; then the elder villain rose to his feet again.

"His heart beats," he said, drawing a deep breath of relief, "and consciousness is slowly returning."

"You would not let me settle accounts with him," said Barton, "as I wished to do. Therefore you must put him out of the way of troubling me for a few days."

"I will," exclaimed Captain Lavern, with sudden animation.

"How?"

"The dungeon. Had you forgotten that?"

A shudder passed through Barton's frame in spite of himself. When the door of the dungeon, as it had been named by one of the band who had spent a number of days in its sombre shades, once closed on an inmate, they scarcely opened again to let him out a living man to the air and sunshine.

"You will confine Ned Bachman in the dungeon?" asked Barton, half distrustfully.

"Yes; at least until I can bring him to terms," Captain Lavern replied in a significant tone of voice.

"That will be long enough for my purpose;" and the rascal smiled when he thought what an easy prey Hero must now become, since he would have no fear of interruption from our hero.

"He must be removed at once."

"Can we not raise him between us?"

Barton nodded, though with very ill grace. He and Captain Lavern raised Ned's senseless body between them, and, not without difficulty, succeeded in bearing him between them to the subterranean prison with which this the strangest of all strange buildings was provided. Here he was thrust into a black and noisome cell, and left to recover himself as best he might.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE DUNGEON.

SOME time elapsed before Ned Bachman's senses fully returned to him.

He woke to consciousness at last to find himself lying on a pile of damp and musty straw, surrounded by deep darkness.

He very readily comprehended the truth—that his enemies had made him their prisoner.

Had Nancy betrayed him? No, she must have intended to serve him faithfully. At any rate, she had guided him to the window from whence he had witnessed the second abduction of Hero.

Beyond a doubt, the girl was as truly his friend as she professed to be.

Escape seemed impossible, and yet, good God! he *must* escape, or Hero's dishonor would surely be compassed.

He paced the floor in a perfect agony of distress until completely exhausted. Then he threw himself on the pile of straw, and kindly Nature, pitying his misery, at last came to his relief, and he sank into a heavy and dreamless slumber.

He must have lain there for several hours. When at last he awoke, he saw that he had had a visitor, for an oil-lamp was burning on the floor, and a tray of refreshments stood near it.

He caught up the lamp, and by its friendly light proceeded to examine his cell. It was a room about ten feet square, and seemed to be constructed of solid masonry.

Of course the door was secured on the outside. He was

as much a prisoner as though shut up in the deepest dungeon of the Bastile.

The hours wore on in silent monotony, maddening to the brain of man. At last footsteps were heard to approach the cell, and a folded slip of paper was thrust between the bars of the grating let into the door, and then the footsteps hastily retreated.

Ned picked up the paper, and found it to be addressed to himself. It ran thus:

“MY DARLING: Do you think I have deserted you? No, no. I could never do that. I am only biding my time. No stone shall be left unturned until you again walk the earth a free man. I swear it.

“You have Barton and Captain Lavern to thank for your incarceration. I don’t know why they wish to detain you here. They will tell me nothing; neither can I gain permission to see you. It was with great reluctance that they permitted me to send these few lines to you.

“Believe me, darling, I am working hard to deliver you from your imprisonment. You know the terrible power the men of the Black Band hold over me and my father. I know their secrets, and yet am bound by a most horrible oath not to betray them.

“But I will never desert you. Only be patient, and in good time you will be released once more. If any propositions are made to you by Captain Lavern or others, I advise you to accept them. It may be your only hope. I am so helpless of myself alone.

“That God will keep and sustain you is the fervent prayer of
HORTENSE.”

Ned read the note to the last line. Then he deliberately tore it into shreds and scattered the fragments on the floor, while a disdainful smile curled his lips.

"That woman is as false as she is fair," he muttered. "In spite of all her fine words, I am convinced she has loaned herself to the plot Barton and Captain Lavern has hatched for my ruin."

He did not say "my father" on this occasion. It seemed as though the words would blister his tongue.

On learning from the note that the captain of the Black Band was concerned in his incarceration he experienced a sudden revulsion of feeling towards the man he had worked so hard to reform.

"I owe no affection to a man who can deliberately plot my ruin, as I now fully believe Captain Larven has done," he thought.

Then his thoughts reverted to Hortense. He recalled how the girl Nancy had warned him to beware of her. "The girl was right in her judgment; I am sure of it. And yet that woman is my betrothed wife."

The mere thought sent a shiver of disgust through his veins.

Another hour wore on. Then at last a key was turned in the lock and Captain Lavern entered the cell.

He was a trifle paler than his wont, and not wholly at ease. Nevertheless he came forward bowing and smiling, and trying to make quite a show of careless good-nature.

"How do you like your quarters, my boy?" he cried out in well-simulated cheerfulness.

"Humph!" muttered Ned. "I suppose I have you to thank for this indignity."

"Me and Eugene Barton."

"Yes. How affectionately solicitous you are for my welfare! You dare not even trust me with my liberty. I wonder if all parents are like yourself."

Captain Lavern studied the face before him closely by the flickering lamplight. "You want your liberty," he said presently. "You can regain it."



"How?" cried Ned, eagerly.

"By obeying my orders."

"Of course," said Ned bitterly.

"Let me tell you the conditions of your release."

"I will listen."

"You have not forgotten the conversation that passed between you and myself on a previous occasion?"

"To what conversation do you refer?"

"Pshaw!" cried Captain Lavern, petulantly. "You know very well. You urged me to reform, to give up my present mode of life. I promised to do so if you on your side would—"

"If I would rob my uncle and benefactor—the man who has filled the place you should have held, and been more than a father to me," interrupted Ned, indignantly.

Captain Lavern seemed wholly unmoved. "That promise I made you is still open for your acceptance," he said coolly. "Do as I wish, and you shall have your liberty from the moment your word is given."

"Never!"

"Bah! You'd better take a second thought."

"I can have no second thought where the question involves my honor," said Ned.

"Ned, my dear boy," said the Captain, smoothly, "please to bear in mind that another question besides your safety or my redemption, is now involved."

"What is that?"

"Hero Dalton's honor."

The young man started as though he had received a heavy blow.

"Good God!" he gasped.

"I know you love her, and are anxious to save her. How can you do that unless your own liberty is restored to you? You are her only friend. If you desert her, she is lost indeed."

Ned paced wildly over the hard, damp floor. His brain was becoming confused.

"Do you refuse to save the woman you love from dishonor?" persisted Captain Lavern.

Ned looked at him sternly. "Was it to make such a bargain as you have proposed that you first invited me to this den of robbers?" he asked.

"No matter," answered the Captain, who now seemed inclined to throw off all disguise. "It is enough that you know the price of your freedom. What have you to say? Do you agree to my terms?"

"No; a thousand times no!"

"Very well," said Captain Lavern, his tone perfectly unruffled still. "You may yet see cause to alter your decision."

Then he left the cell, locking the door behind him.

More than twenty-four hours of agony and suspense went by in that lonely dungeon before Captain Lavern made his appearance a second time.

"Have you come to your senses?" were his first words of greeting.

"You are driving my senses from me," cried Ned.

"Do you agree to my terms?"

"No."

The tone was clear and distinct, without a trace of hesitation or indecision. It was evident our hero was firm in his resolution not to betray his benefactor.

The Captain shrugged his shoulders and smiled significantly. "Miss Dalton is still unharmed," he said. "But I may not be able to say as much the next time I come." He quitted the cell without another word.

Two or three hours later, as Ned was sitting on his pile of straw, his head resting on his clasped hands, a sharp, clicking sound struck suddenly on his ear.

He started to his feet in great trepidation. Just as he

did so, a portion of what had seemed the solid wall of the cell swung inward, and the girl Nancy stepped through the opening, bearing a lighted lamp in her hand.

A cry fell from Ned's lips.

"Oh, you have come to set me free!" he exclaimed.

"Silence!" she whispered, raising one hand with a warning gesture. "Follow me without a word, and I'll do what I can to save you."

"How did you discover my prison?" he persisted in asking.

"I remained in the room where the trap-door is, and heard Captain Lavern and Barton laying their plans. But I could not come sooner to your rescue, for I was suspected and have been watched."

"Lead on," said Ned, then. "You may be sure I'm ready to go."

He followed the strange girl through the secret door, which closed noiselessly behind them. Before them was a narrow passage and a rude steep staircase, which they ascended.

Above they found a door; entering through that they were in another narrow and gloomy passage. When the fugitives were midway of this last, footsteps were heard approaching. Nancy hastily extinguished the light she carried.

"Good God!" she cried. "I fear we are lost!"

She pulled Ned into an angle of the wall, and crouched flat on the floor behind him, holding her very breath.

Meanwhile the steps came nearer and nearer.

CHAPTER XIX.

DETECTED.

CROUCHED in an angle of the passage, Ned realized in every tingling nerve of his body the imminent danger of discovery he was incurring. The footsteps sounded frightfully near, and now a gleam of light penetrated the passage and he saw several persons approaching, and among the rest Captain Lavern and the dwarf Mansauel.

“For God’s sake don’t stir!” whispered Nancy.

He pressed her hand as a sign that he comprehended as well as the girl herself the nature of the peril that menaced them. But now the men were too close for him to risk a reply in words.

Their enemies strode forward, keeping close together and in the centre of the passage. They passed the fugitives, and Ned was drawing a deep breath of relief when Captain Lavern, who was carrying one of the lamps that was to guide their feet, turned and thrust it into the very angle of the wall in which our hero and his companion were concealed. His quick ear heard the sound of some suspicious movement in there.

“Ah, ha! who is this?” he exclaimed.

Ned jumped to his feet, and attempted to dart past him; but the clever villain anticipated this movement, and suddenly thrust the lamp into the hand of some of his followers and caught the young man’s arm in a vise-like grip. In the momentary silence that ensued, Captain Lavern had recognized, not without some feeling of deep surprise, however, who was his captive. Bending nearer the young man, he said in a whisper.

"I don't know how you could escape from that cell; but you must go back, or rather to another one. The power is all in my hands, and you'd better submit quietly."

His face glowed stern and resolute in the flickering lamp-light. Ned saw that he had spoken truly, and attempted no resistance, since that would be simple madness.

Meanwhile the girl Nancy, who still crouched low against the wall, where the darkness concealed her, had not been discovered. A moment later he had the satisfaction of seeing her glide noiselessly down the passage, and was assured that she, at least, had escaped detection.

The mind of the young man was soon made up. He looked earnestly at the Captain and said, "I will go with you."

"It is well for you." Then aloud he added: "This is a surprise. Were you hunting for Barton? Of course you were. Just come this way and I'll show you where to find him."

While this conversation was taking place, Ned caught the eye of Mansauel the dwarf, fixed upon his face in an earnest, significant look such as he wholly failed to interpret.

"What does that ugly brute mean by staring at me so fixedly?" he said to himself.

The Captain now extended his hand for one of the lamps. "Remain here, men," he said earnestly. "I will return as soon as I guide my son to his destination."

He slipped his hand under Ned's arm and motioned towards the door leading to the cell our hero had just quitted. "How did you succeed in escaping?" he asked when once at a safe distance from the men. "By the secret passage, of course?"

"Yes."

"How did you discover it?"

"That," answered Ned, "is my secret."

He was determined not to implicate Nancy in any way.

"I'm going to give you new quarters, any way," said Captain Lavern. "A cell in which you can only find egress in the regular orthodox manner."

Ned's blood coursed like fire through his veins.

"I may refuse to suffer myself to be shut up again," he said in a low, deep voice.

"No, you will not. We are alone. It would only be a trial of my strength against yours; and remember that I am your father."

"When have you remembered that I am your son?" said Ned, bitterly.

"There hasn't been much love lost between us," he said in reply. "Nevertheless, you will not try to break away from me; and here is the proof that you will not."

For some minutes his right hand had been resting in his bosom. Now he suddenly drew it out, bringing a pistol with it.

"A single treacherous movement on your part and I shoot you dead at my feet," he exclaimed.

"Put up your weapon," said Ned, disdainfully. "Crime-stained as you are, I cannot forget that to you I owe my existence. I scorn to struggle with you."

The Captain's blue eyes twinkled maliciously.

"Good!" he cried. "The gods be praised that I have so filial a son."

Smiling to himself, he led the way down the steep staircase and past the cell in which Ned had before been an enforced inmate, and finally paused before a second door.

Ned glanced back just as he was crossing the threshold of the cell. He thought he had heard the faint echo of footsteps, and now he distinctly saw a small, misshapen figure retreating hastily along the passage.

Had Mansauel the dwarf followed him? and if so, for what purpose?

"Let me repeat my terms once more and for the last time," said Captain Lavern, turning abruptly upon his companion. "Consent to conduct myself and a few faithful followers to the Hall and tell us where your uncle's money and valuables are secreted, and you are at liberty to go wherever you wish."

"I will never do that."

The baffled villain swung on his heel. "You'll come to your senses yet," he growled, going slowly from the cell.

Some hours wore on. Misery made Ned wakeful and he could not close his eyes. Too many wretched thoughts were urging upon his brain to admit of sleep. Suddenly a key was turned in the lock of his cell door, and a man glided through the open door almost noiselessly. It was Mansauel the dwarf.

"You?" cried Ned, regarding him in unbounded surprise.

"Hush!" whispered the dwarf. "Don't betray me."

"Why are you here?"

"I came for a little talk with you."

Ned's amazement deepened.

"Well?" he said slowly.

"You came here the other night in search of Hero Dalton," cried Mansauel, excitedly. "You suspected that she had been detained here by Eugene Barton."

"Yes."

"I know much more than you suspect. I've watched, and listened, and waited for this very chance."

"Do you know what has become of Hero Dalton?"

"You saw her driven away from this house by Barton's men," continued Mansauel, who seemed determined to demonstrate his sagacity, "and you would have followed her abductors, but Barton himself set upon you. You were borne to the neighboring dungeon by him and Captain Lavern."

"Yes," answered Ned.

"You see I'm well posted," grinned the dwarf. "Now you will ask me why I am here. I answer in one word, that I came to help you."

Ned started forward and seized his hand. "Will you aid me to escape from this place?" he cried eagerly.

Mansauel shook his head. "My hand must not be seen in this business, or my life would pay the forfeit. You must gain liberty for yourself by consenting to the captain's terms."

"Then you do not intend to help me at all?"

"Yes, I do; for I'll tell you where Miss Dalton has been taken."

"Tell me now."

"No," was the sullen answer. "I'm a member of the Black Band, and I won't go back on my pals; but if you will consent to Captain's Lavern's proposition, I will tell you."

"Captain Lavern sent you here to sound me."

"No, he did not. I've run a great risk in coming at all."

Ned looked at him keenly and suspiciously.

"I do not comprehend your object in coming here," he said slowly.

Mansauel's face darkened until it was terrible to look upon. The scar on his cheek stood out livid and prominent. The fury of an angry devil glowered from his burning eye.

"Do you see that?" he hissed between his teeth, laying one finger against his cheek. "Eugene Barton gave me that mark. Curse him, curse him! He struck me as if I had been the veriest cur fawning at his feet. And he shall smart for it."

Mansauel shrugged his crooked shoulders.

"I was taken with her pretty face, it must be acknowl-

edged. Who could resist her? Nobody has ever loved me since my mother fondled me, a child, on her knee. I am too ugly to inspire love, but I did not think of that."

"Poor fellow!" said Ned, pityingly.

"We'll not speak of that," said the dwarf, hastily. "The delusion is over. It was a foolish error on my part, and did not last long. Now there is no room in my heart for love; it is entirely filled with a burning thirst for revenge."

"Not on Miss Dalton?"

"No. She never wronged me. But on Barton. I hate him! He struck me, and I never forgive a blow. It shall cost him dear before I die."

Ned shuddered, in spite of himself, at sight of the smouldering fury burning in the dwarf's eyes.

"What will you do?" he asked.

"Foil my enemy in every manner possible. Cause his schemes to come to naught. Baffle him, harass him, defeat him; and by and by come to a deadly reckoning with him."

He waited for no reply from Ned, but, having given utterance to those last words, he turned on his heel and quitted the cell.

CHAPTER XX.

THE MIDNIGHT EXPEDITION.

THE morning subsequent to the events narrated in the last chapter was well advanced when Captain Lavern made his appearance in the underground room where Ned Bachman sat, ruminating as calmly as possible over the proposition Mansauel the dwarf had made him.

"You've had a night for reflection," the Captain said, in an abrupt tone of voice. "I now ask you, and for the last time, what is your decision?"

Ned calmly met the searching gaze fixed on his face.

"In other words," he said, "will I consent to become a party to the robbery of my uncle or not?"

"Humph! suit yourself in the terms you employ."

"You are determined to make me your accomplice in your crimes?"

"Yes. You know precisely where George keeps his money and valuables, and can guide us directly to the proper spot."

"That is true."

"Will you do it?"

"I will," answered Ned, though not without a struggle. Captain Lavern uttered a low exclamation of satisfaction. "I thought you would come to your senses presently, my boy," he said triumphantly.

"Hero must be saved at any sacrifice," said Ned, half to himself.

"Ah, there's the rub, eh?"

"You know very well that it is not concern for my own life that has induced me to become a party to the crime you have planned," the young man returned scornfully.

"Bah! your motive is nothing, and less than nothing, to me."

"Yes; you were only concerned to gain my consent."

"True. And you have given it," said Captain Lavern, tauntingly.

Ned turned away his head. "When am I to be set at liberty?" he asked.

"To-night, after you have accompanied us to the Hall and gone through with your part of the programme."

Ned attempted no further remonstrance. He saw very clearly that it would be useless.

"Then you agree to what I propose?"

"The inmates of the house are not to be disturbed?"

"Of course not."

"Uncle George always intended to make me his heir. The plunder you get to-night can be deducted from the amount he would have left me. I think he will forgive me for becoming a party to the crime when he knows all the facts."

"What!" cried Captain Lavern, with a furious oath, "you'll not be such a fool as to tell him you had a hand in the scheme?"

"Most assuredly," was the quiet answer.

"He may believe your version of the story or he may not."

"True; but he shall hear it none the less."

Captain Lavern stood biting his lip. He look baffled and angry, as if matters were likely to take a different turn from what he had anticipated.

"You'd better come away with us after the deed is done, and not return till to-morrow. Keep a quiet tongue in your head and George may never know your agency in the robbery."

"It doesn't make any difference to me what you may say. My mind is made up. But I should like to know what you expect to gain by to-night's work. There is something, I can see, besides the money you are after."

"It does not matter what may end by to-night's expedition," said the Captain, gruffly. "You have given your word and will not go back from it."

"I have no such intentions." Then turning suddenly, he added: "No matter what may happen, you will not offer personal harm to Uncle George?"

"No."

And there the conference ended.

Ned waited with all the patience he could command for

night to fall. Having once made up his mind to save Hero Dalton at whatever sacrifice, at whatever cost, to himself, the dragging moments seemed like so many hours, until he could do something towards putting his fixed determination into execution.

The hours wore on. Of course Ned had no means of accurately marking time in his dismal prison. But when he judged it must be verging upon midnight, Captain Lavern, followed by two of his men, entered the cell.

"We are ready," said the former.

"So am I," returned Ned.

The two men silently placed themselves on either side of him. Between them he was led from the cell up a flight of steps, along several passages, until finally a heavy oaken door seemed to bar all further progress.

The Captain, who acted as guide, produced a key and unlocked the door.

The whole party passed through, and, to his infinite joy, Ned once again felt the free air of heaven strike upon his forehead.

A glance around convinced him he was in the self-same alley from which he had first gained admittance to the ruinous and apparently deserted public-house.

He was led down the alley for some distance, to where a carriage was in waiting. "Jump in," said one of the men who were guiding him.

Ned obeyed, and seated himself in the carriage. Captain Lavern followed him, and the other ruffians mounted the box with the driver.

They drove rapidly, and after the lapse of about thirty minutes the carriage stopped with a jerk.

"Here we are," said one of the men, appearing at the door and speaking in a low tone of voice.

Our little party left the carriage, which for prudence' sake had been stopped in a shady lane about a dozen rods

from the Hall, where the thick foliage of a group of trees effectually concealed it from the observation of any chance passer-by in the thoroughfare beyond, if there should be any such at that late hour of night.

But Captain Lavern, accompanied by Ned and the two men, started at a brisk pace for the Hall.

On the porch they paused for brief consultation. "Of course you have a latch-key?" said Captain Lavern, addressing Ned.

"Yes."

"Then open the door for us, and take care that you lead us direct to the spot where George keeps his money. Now be on your guard. No dallying, no playing off, remember. I intend to shoot you dead at my feet at the first sign of treachery."

"I meditate nothing of the sort," returned Ned. "When I agreed to conduct you here, I made up my mind to serve you faithfully."

He stepped toward the door as he spoke, then staggered and stood still in his tracks. The full enormity of the crime he was about to commit made itself frightfully clear to his mind.

"Here is the key," he said. "Open the door; I cannot."

He staggered backward to the wall. Captain Lavern, with a smothered curse, snatched the key from his hand and proceeded to unlock the door, which he pushed softly ajar.

It opened with scarce a sound. Then suddenly from within came a rush of feet, a defiant shout, followed by several pistol-shots discharged in rapid succession.

There was a heavy fall, and a deep groan of pain.

CHAPTER XXI.

It is now time that we should return to our unfortunate heroine, whom we left locked in an upper chamber at Bri-armere. It was a luxuriously furnished apartment, and Hero shuddered as her keen eye swept over the room. The poor girl understood but too well that these pictured walls must have witnessed many a scene of outrage in times past, and her very heart grew sick within her. She immediately crossed over to the window, which was half hidden in voluminous folds of heavy silk. They were all securely nailed down, and resisted all her efforts to raise them. By placing her face close to the glass she was able to see without. The apartment fronted on the back yard, and she could not see the Hall at all, or scarcely any familiar object. She was in the third story, and there was a sheer descent of many feet from her window to the ground, without any break whatever in the way of balconies or projecting caps. Even if the casements had not been secured, escape in this way would have been out of the question. She threw herself on the couch, a prey to despair. The long night wore away at last.

The next morning was considerably advanced, when a key turned sharply in the lock, and Monsieur de Noir entered the apartment, bearing a neatly arranged breakfast-tray.

"Good-morning, my angel," was his greeting, as he approached with a smile upon his lips. "I hope you rested well."

"Do you think it possible for me to rest well in such a place?" Hero exclaimed indignantly.

"Why not? Surely you are surrounded by luxuries a queen might covet."

"They are the price of crime."

"So, so. What is that to you, my beauty—or to me, for that matter? I seldom concern myself with regard to what transpires in the room."

"I can readily believe that."

Monsieur de Noir gave vent to a good-natured laugh.

"O fatal beauty!" he said tauntingly. "If you were only ugly, you would never have been shut up here."

Héro clasped her hands, while an expression of heart-felt agony rested on her features. At that moment she would have changed places with the ugliest of God's creatures if she might but leave this terrible house.

"O blessed beauty!" murmured De Noir, advancing as if to embrace her.

"What would you do? Leave!" screamed the frightened girl, retreating to the wall.

"Will you not grant me a single kiss, my angel?"

"Never! For God's sake go away!"

"And leave you? I haven't the fortitude. I'm beginning to envy Monsieur Barton his charming prize."

A sensual, cruel light burned in his eyes. He flung out both his arms. Héro cowered before him, nearly wild with terror. A scream for assistance was on her lips, when suddenly a loud, sneering laugh sounded through the room. Monsieur de Noir stopped short. His arms fell listlessly to his side, and he stared aghast at the intruder. It was Hortense, his daughter.

"I've put a stop to your little game, Miss Dalton. Perhaps it is quite as well, on the whole," and she gave her father a threatening look. "I scarcely think Mr. Barton would exactly relish your attentions to Miss Dalton, did he know of them."

De Noir had the grace to color.

"On my word of honor, Hortense," he stammered, "I meant nothing by them."

Hortense's lip curled scornfully,

"Of course you meant nothing. Men never do mean anything until they have accomplished their object."

"Cruel, cruel Hortense!"

"Don't come the sentimental dodge with me, papa; it's of no use. You and I understand each other far too well."

He laughed carelessly.

"I'll go away this minute. Barton shall have nothing further to complain of in my conduct towards his charming prize, I give you my word. I'm determined to crucify the flesh."

The bland villain bowed low, then turned on his heel and left the room.

Hero had been watching the two like some frightened fawn, trembling from head to foot. She now caught hold of Hortense's hand and raised it suddenly to her lips.

"God bless you!" she faltered. "You have saved me."

Hortense snatched away her hand as if those innocent lips would have bred infection.

"Do you think I interfered to save you?" she cried sharply. "If so, you are sadly mistaken. I hate you, with your pretty face and babyish ways. The sooner you are grovelling in the dust—too vile a creature for my lips to name—the better I will be pleased. But I did not choose that my father should be the instrument of your ruin."

Having given utterance to these bitter words, that false, heartless woman quitted the chamber.

Towards nightfall a second intruder crossed the threshold of her prison. This time it was Peggy, the old hag, Hero's attendant when a prisoner in the den of the Black Band. Of course Hero remembered having seen the old woman, but she was not a little surprised to meet her at Briarmere.

"Why have you come here?" asked Hero.

"To bring up your supper, in course," grinned Peggy, depositing the tray she carried upon the table.

"I mean why have you come to Briarmere?" asked Hero, to whom the visits of the old hag were not any too welcome.

"He, he! Because Barton sent me."

"For what?"

"To take care of you, I reckon, until he is ready to take care of you himself."

"When will that be?" she forced herself to ask.

"Don't know. P'raps sooner, p'raps later."

The poor girl tried to eat, thinking to gain a little time in this way.

"Where is Nancy?" she asked abruptly, taking up the tea-cup and making an effort to swallow a few drops of the beverage.

Peggy gave her a suspicious look.

"Who's Nancy?" she growled.

"The young girl I saw in the den of the Black Band."

"Humph! She's there yet, I reckon; and likely to remain there, for that matter."

"Does she know where I have been taken?"

"Of course not. What business could it be of hers, I'd like to know?"

Hero sighed heavily. Unacknowledged even to herself, she had, up to this moment, cherished a hope that Nancy might have found out where she had been imprisoned, and that she would have sent the proper information to her friends. Oh, how earnestly she prayed that Ned had not fallen a victim to his zeal in her behalf!

Peggy soon went away, refusing to answer any more questions. Two or three days elapsed without event of any sort. The old woman regularly brought up her meals, but the captive girl saw no one else, not even Hortense. She was sitting in a listless attitude by the window, one night, at a very late hour. The time, the reader must bear in mind, was nearly

twenty-four hours subsequent to the burglarious expedition led by Captain Lavern, a portion of the events of which we recounted in the last chapter. Suddenly the door opened and Monsieur de Noir entered the apartment. His eyes were wild and burning, and he had evidently been drinking; but there was no mistaking the impassioned gaze he fixed upon our heroine's face as he slowly advanced to where she was sitting.

"I'm no ascetic, my angel," he said in a low, dogged tone of voice. "*Ma fois!* What's the use of struggling? I can't resist. Though Barton and a legion of devils stood in my way, I'd defy them all to possess you."

Even as his scorching breath burned on her cheek, the girl shook off the bonds of horror that held her. She sprang to her feet, pushed him violently from her, and darted towards the door.

Joy, joy! The villain had neglected to close the door behind him when he entered the apartment. She darted into the passage and down a flight of stairs, shrieking at the top of her voice in uncontrolled terror. In the hall below two frantic arms suddenly encircled her flying figure, and the false, treacherously sweet voice of Hortense de Noir hissed close to her ear,

"Girl, girl, you shall not escape me. You shall not. I'll strangle you sooner!"

At this same instant a strange confusion arose from below, and flying feet were heard darting up the stairs. Help was coming to one or the other of these struggling women. But to which?

CHAPTER XXII.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END.

It was a moment of intense excitement when the burglarious attempt of Captain Lavern and his confederates met with such an unexpected check.

As we have already stated in another chapter of this veracious narrative, the instant the door was pushed open by the daring leader of the band, they were suddenly greeted by a volley of pistol-shots. There was an instantaneous recoil, and cries of rage and wonderment filled the air. One of the men fell heavily to the ground. The other two, after hesitating a minute, as if tempted even then to contest the victory, turned on their heels at last and fled for dear life. Ned crouched still more closely to the wall, expecting nothing else than that, in the excitement and confusion of the moment, he would be mistaken for one of the robbers, and shot down in his tracks. Indeed, his fears were very nearly realized. Three or four dark forms came thronging out upon the porch, one of whom sprang upon our hero and pushed the cold muzzle of a pistol against his forehead.

"Don't fire," he cried. "I'm a friend."

Then there was a sudden exclamation close to his side, and the weapon was struck from the hand of the man who held it.

"It is Ned; he is my nephew!" was uttered in the well-remembered tones of his uncle George.

"Yes," said Ned, calmly, "it is I."

Mr. Bachman himself stood nearer our hero than any of the rest. He held out both his hands eagerly to the young man.

"Welcome, welcome!" he exclaimed.

Then, in the next breath, he asked,

"Why are you here at such a time, and under such circumstances?"

"Wait," said Ned. "I will explain, so far as I am able, by and by."

He stepped quickly to the spot where the wounded man was lying groaning with pain, and leaned over him a minute; then rose up again, his face showing deadly pale in the gleam of the lights.

"Uncle George," he said in a subdued tone, "come here."

Mr. Bachman advanced to his side.

Ned pointed silently to the prostrate figure. The elder man reluctantly stooped a little nearer.

"Who is it, Ned?" he whispered.

"Don't you see? It is my father."

"Robert?" groaned Mr. Bachman.

"Good God!"

"God forgive him, for I cannot," said Mr. Bachman, in the same agitated tone of voice. "He came here again to rob me. Such conduct is without excuse."

"He may be dying."

"I hope he is."

"Oh, Uncle George, don't say that! Vile as this man is, remember that he is your brother—that the same mother nursed you both."

The appeal was not without its effect.

"Lift up the poor wretch and bear him to a bedroom," said Mr. Bachman, addressing the servants.

A physician was immediately summoned; while the butler, who possessed some little surgical knowledge, attempted to stay the loss of blood while waiting for the physician to arrive.

Ned could not remain in the chamber of the wounded

man and listen to the groans of agony. So he drew Mr. Bachman into the library and carefully closed the door of communication.

Both uncle and nephew were very pale. Ned, thinking how his uncle would receive the explanations he had to make, was particularly agitated, and Mr. Bachman was very much shaken by finding his brother wounded.

"Tell me," said Ned, the instant he had closed the door, "how it happened that you were up and dressed at the time the burglars attempted to force an entrance?"

"I could not sleep. To be frank, I was thinking of you, Ned, and wondering why you did not come home, or send some word as to your whereabouts. I sat in this very room, deep in thought, when I heard some suspicious noise on the lawn."

"You suspected at once that something was amiss?"

"Yes. I had not forgotten Robert's former attempt to rob me. And I had all along been unable to banish the presentiment that the attempt would be repeated, either by Robert himself or by some other members of the gang to which he evidently belongs."

"Yes, yes."

"I was prepared for such an event."

"How prepared?"

"I had a policeman stationed in the house. You must have seen him."

"I did observe a strange face among the servants."

"That was the officer."

Ned drew a deep breath of relief. In spite of the sufferings of the wicked man who claimed to be his father, he could not help feeling thankful that the affair had terminated in such a manner.

"And you?" cried Mr. Bachman, suddenly. "Were you in company with those desperate men?"

"I was."

"How did it happen?"

There was no suspicion in the voice of the elder man as he asked the above question; only intense interest. Ned noticed the fact and was much pleased.

"I cannot tell you any of the particulars," Ned answered, very quietly. "All I can tell you is that I was compelled to give them ingress to this house, and must have told them where to find your money and valuables had the affair terminated differently."

"And you would have done it? Oh, Ned!"

"Uncle, I dared not to refuse to become their accomplice. The consequences involved were far too terrible to risk a refusal of their demands."

"They should be very terrible indeed."

"Do not reproach me, Uncle George."

Mr. Bachman studied the young man's face very earnestly for several minutes.

"There is something in all this that I do not understand," he said at last. "But you have always been true and faithful, my boy, and I'll not distrust you now."

"God bless you, Uncle George!"

"Can you tell me nothing?"

"Nothing. I am bound by an oath."

He referred to the oath he had taken to keep the secrets of the Black Band.

"I can guess something of the truth, I think," said Mr. Bachman, after a short pause. "But we will let the subject drop, since it appears to distress you. Have you succeeded in your quest? Have you discovered Hero Dalton?"

"No. But I hope to find her very soon. A person who knows where she is imprisoned has promised to communicate with me."

"Then she is really kept a prisoner?"

"Yes."

"Why have you sent no word to me of your whereabouts during these days of your absence?"

"I could not."

"Ah," cried Mr. Bachman, "we are verging on the forbidden topic once more! I will not question you more, Ned."

The physician soon made his appearance. After he had had time to examine thoroughly into the condition of the wounded burglar, he was summoned into the library. Ned met him at the door.

"How is your patient, doctor?" he asked anxiously.

The physician shook his head gravely.

"How long will he last?"

"Twenty-four hours, perhaps."

Ned's hand sought Mr. Bachman's, and the two met in a significant pressure. They entered the chamber of the wounded man and drew near the bed. Captain Lavern opened his eyes as they approached, and fixed on them a look of vengeful hate and rage. He seemed to have fully recovered his senses.

"You have won," he hissed savagely. "It's just my cursed luck to be foiled on the eve of success. That is too much."

"You were engaged in an unlawful act that merited defeat," answered Mr. Bachman, sternly.

"Ha, ha!" and the villain laughed mockingly.

"What do you mean by your strange words and stranger actions?" asked Mr. Bachman.

"That boy!" and the dying man lifted one trembling finger and pointed at Ned. "You came in like the best of friends. You are just as fond of him as ever?"

"Why should I not be fond of him?" said Mr. Bachman, surprised at the villain's malevolence.

"Did he not come here this very night to rob you? Is he not fast going to the bad? In short, is he any better

than I am, or any one of my friends and members of my band?"

"Calm yourself," said Mr. Bachman, laying his hand on the Captain's arm. "If you have sought to breed distrust between Ned and myself, you have failed signally in your purpose. If he came here to-night in company with your dastardly gang, it was because he was compelled by peculiar circumstances to do so."

"Has he betrayed us?" shrieked Captain Lavern.

"No. Why will you not compose yourself? You have not many hours to live. You had better seek to make peace with God before you are summoned before his dread tribunal."

"Die?" cried the poor wretch, staring up at him darkly. "I will not die. I'll live for revenge, and have it, too, in spite of you. You've foiled me of it once; you'll not foil me a second time. Die? Ha, ha! you'd like to make me believe that nonsense, and so worm from me my secret. But you'll not succeed."

Ned's eyes met Mr. Bachman's in silent perplexity. To what secret did the dying man refer? Neither of the two had the least idea.

CHAPTER XXIII.

AT LAST.

NIGHT wore away and a new day dawned; still there was no perceptible change in Captain Lavern's condition. The day waned slowly, and he still lay in that sullen, apathetic state, rarely speaking to anybody or taking any

notice of what transpired about him. Ned meanwhile experienced an agony of suspense almost beyond his powers of endurance. The uncertainty that surrounded Hero's fate nearly drove him wild. Mansauel the dwarf did not make his appearance as he had promised, and without his assistance Ned knew not in what direction to prosecute his search. And yet every moment was of untold value. The meshes of Barton's nefarious plot might be closing more and more hopelessly about his intended victim with every hour that elapsed. Just at sunset he wended his way into the garden, his thoughts still occupied in futile efforts to solve the secret of Hero's unknown fate. He had barely reached one of the most remote walks when a short, misshapen figure crept from behind a thicket and approached swiftly. It was Mansauel the dwarf.

"I've kept my word," he said, with a grim smile, when he reached the young man's side.

"Then you will guide me to the place where Miss Dalton is imprisoned?"

"I will, at least, tell you where to find her. You have kept faith with me, and there is such a thing as honor among thieves."

"You know that Captain Lavern has received his death-wound?"

"Aye, and so does all the Black Band. But I am not here to talk of Captain Lavern. I have my own wrongs to avenge. Because of my hatred of Eugene Barton I have sworn to help you."

"Where is Hero concealed?" cried Ned, eagerly, catching hold of the dwarf's hands. "Tell me that and I will ask no more of you."

"She is at this moment detained a prisoner at Briarmere."

"At Briarmere?" echoed Ned, in tones of intense amazement.

"I've told you the truth," said Mansauel, sullenly. "If you don't believe me, it's no fault of mine."

"I do not doubt your word. I was overcome with amazement, that was all. How can I reward you for the intelligence you have given me?"

"By wresting his victim from Barton's clutches at the very moment when he feels most certain of triumphing over her innocence," was answered. "I ask no further reward than that."

Ned hurried away towards the house. His mind was busily revolving all that had just been told him. If the dwarf's story was true—and he had no reason to doubt it—Hero and Hortense must be under the same roof, and Hortense without a doubt knew of Hero's imprisonment. In that case the former, his betrothed wife, was viler and more treacherous than his worst fears had ever depicted her.

It was nearly midnight when he left the Hall to go to the rescue of Hero. When he reached Briarmere he found it brilliantly lighted, as usual, and the gamblers were holding their nightly revel in its gilded saloons.

"The gilded trappings of crime," he said between his teeth. "Oh, how completely Hortense imposed on me by her specious story that night in the tower. Oh! just Heaven, that one so beautiful should be so utterly depraved!"

He was now crossing the lawn, and had almost reached the door, when suddenly a dozen dark forms rose up from the very earth, so to speak, and confronted him.

"Who are you?" whispered a stern voice, "and what are you doing here?"

Ned drew back.

"That is my business," he answered haughtily.

The man seemed to recognize our hero the moment he spoke.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, in manifest relief. "It is Mr. Bachman. All right, men. Don't harm him."

"Why should they harm me?"

"Don't you have an inkling of the truth, Mr. Bachman? Those men are under my command. I am a detective."

"A detective?"

"Yes. I was in your uncle's employ on the night of the attempted burglary."

"Yes, yes. I remember you now."

"Can't you guess why we are here?"

He waved his hand towards the house as he spoke. On the still night-air the sounds of revelry within came out at that moment, clear and distinct.

"You are going to break up that devil's haunt?" cried Ned.

"Yes. Will there be any trouble in forcing an entrance, think you?"

"I know not. Come, let us move on at once. A dear friend of mine is detained a prisoner in that house. I am anxious to set her free as soon as possible."

No more was said. The whole party moved swiftly but noiselessly to the front entrance, which, fortunately, did not prove to be fastened. They entered the hall, as yet unheard and unseen. Here a succession of shrill screams were heard coming from the upper portion of the house.

"It is Hero's voice!" cried Ned, and bounded for the stairs.

His feet flew up them in great bounds. He reached the upper hall, and there, in the dim light, saw two figures locked in a desperate struggle. He wrenched them violently apart, and then looked from one to the other. As he had expected the moment he saw the figures, he stood in the presence of Hero Dalton and Hortense De Noir.

Our patient reader knows that our heroine had reached

the lower hall in her attempt to escape from Hortense's father, and there had encountered Hortense herself, who had sought to detain her.

Her heart gave a great throb of joy as she recognized her deliverer.

"Oh, Ned, Ned!" she cried, "you have come to save me at last;" and half fainting with happiness, her head sunk upon his bosom.

Meanwhile Hortense had recovered from her shock at Ned's sudden appearance.

"Release that woman, Ned," she now said between her firm white teeth. "Remember that you are bound to me—that I am your promised wife."

"The compact is dissolved by your own treachery," the young man returned sternly. "I know you, siren, for what you are. You played a deep game, but you have lost. The pretty lies you told me that night we were locked into the tower were told in vain. Your concern for your reputation was wholly put on, since you had no reputation to lose."

A confusion below made itself suddenly and alarmingly audible. One or two pistol-shots were discharged; loud oaths could be heard, and the noise of scuffling.

"What does all that noise mean?" cried Hortense, in a voice that was hoarse with alarm.

"It means," calmly replied Ned, "that the police have made a descent on this den of iniquity and will tear it out root and branch."

' Good God! The police?'

She stared at him an instant as if nearly frantic with fear. Then she seemed to rally her powers of action, for she darted swiftly across the hall and disappeared from sight before Ned, had he been so disposed, could have made any movement to detain her. Ned pressed Hero more and more closely to his side.

"Let us leave this house at once," he whispered. "This is no place for you. I think we can escape now in safety."

They hurried down the staircase and out of doors. Once under the far-off twinkling stars of night, our hero paused to ask his companion a single question. The question and the answer he received we shall leave our readers to determine for themselves, as it comes not within the province of this story to treat of such very private and delicate matters.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE RECKONING.

WHEN Ned reached the Hall, with Hero leaning on his arm, he found the servants searching everywhere for him. Captain Lavern was dying and had expressed a wish to see him. Ned hurried directly to his chamber. He found the dying man greatly changed; his face was livid, with the dew of death upon his brow; he lay with set teeth, staring straight before him at George Bachman with the fixed, awful stare of baffled and vengeful hate. He made a slight movement when our hero entered the apartment.

"I'm going, after all," he gasped feebly. "I've hated you, George Bachman, with a bitter hatred. But for the sake of this young man I will make a confession before I die."

"What have I done to merit your hatred?" asked Mr. Bachman. "I never wronged you."

"That is a lie," hissed the dying wretch.

"It is the truth, Robert. When you fled from New Or-

leans, years and years ago, a disgraced and dishonored man, I would gladly have acted a brother's part towards you. But I had means of knowing that you plunged into excesses and crimes without number. That hardened my heart against you."

A queer spasmodic contraction convulsed Captain Lavern's features for a moment.

"Robert Bachman never committed but the one crime of forging the name of his friend," he answered deliberately.

"How can you say that?"

"Because he died within three weeks of the time when his feet first touched the soil of France."

"Died?" cried Ned, springing forward excitedly. "Died so very many years ago? Are you not Robert Bachman? Are you not my father?"

"Neither one nor the other."

George Bachman's lip curled.

"His mind is wandering," he whispered to Ned. "If he is not your father, how came he by his face and voice and eyes and every look?"

The dying man overheard them.

"I am your half-brother; and was his," he said.

"Impossible! My father never married but once."

"No."

"And never had but two sons."

"There you are mistaken; for I am his son—the child of shame. You, no doubt, never heard of me, but I had heard much of you. You were rich and honored; I was an outcast, nameless and homeless. When Robert fled this country in disgrace, I followed him to France. I stood by his death-bed, and I received from his own hand the blood-stone ring I left for you that first night when I sought to rob the Hall. Circumstances prevented me from carrying my design fully into execution. I became connected with

the organization of thieves known as the Black Band, and was making money too fast to give them the go-by. But I hated you, George Bachman, and determined at last to make you suffer for occupying the place that should have been mine as well. I learned how fond you were of Ned, and determined you should suffer through him. I intended to make him as bad as myself; and if we had succeeded in our attempt last night, we should have contrived to fix the whole suspicion of the robbery upon him."

Captain Lavern had not given this recital connectedly as we have put it down, but in a broken, disjointed manner, just as his failing strength would permit. Now he choked and gasped for breath. He strove to speak, but could not. A look of agony contorted his face; he feebly flung out both arms, and sank back upon the pillow dead.

TWENTY-FOUR HOURS LATER.

As the city clocks tolled the hour of midnight, Eugene Barton sat alone in a private room of his imposing mansion in Arlington Street, fast asleep in his chair. He had been ill for two or three days—the result of various dissipations into which he had been plunging with more than his usual license. The illness had prevented him from seeking Hero at Briarmere. In fact, he knew nothing of the events that had transpired at that gambling-den. The striking of the city clocks, or some other sound, perhaps, suddenly aroused him. The instant he made a movement, and before he could prevent anything of the sort, a gag was thrust between his teeth and secured there. Nearly startled out of his wits by this unexpected indignity, he attempted to rise to his feet. He could not stir: he had been fastened to his chair.

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed a mocking voice at his ear.

The next instant Mansauel the dwarf confronted him—Mansauel, with such a look of triumph and malignant hatred in his face as made the doomed wretch shiver with horror.

“Are you surprised to find me here, Eugene Barton?” asked the dwarf. “I don’t mind telling you how I penetrated to your house, if you would like to know. Well, I began to prowl about the house as soon as it was dark. Luckily for me, the kitchen-maid forgot to fasten the basement windows. I took advantage of her carelessness, and here I am.”

Barton could only scowl at his tormentor.

“Why did I come? That is soon told. I came to take your life. Do you see this knife?” and he drew one that had a long, keen, glittering blade from some inner pocket.

“Would you give half your fortune for life and liberty? Ha, ha! They could not be purchased for twice that sum. What is money in comparison with revenge? Nothing; less than nothing.

“Do you wonder why I am so vindictive? Ah, it must be you have forgotten the blow you struck me. Look at the scar it made on my cheek; but the scar on my honor is ten times more deep. No man ever dared to lay his hand on me before. But you—you struck me as if I had been a dog; and I swore, down deep in my heart, that you should be made to suffer ten times the agony I had endured.

“Have I kept my oath? Let us see. That den at Briarmere was broken up last night by the police. Hero Dalton is now at the Hall with Ned Bachman. It was I who told him where to find her. The man you hate will possess her in spite of all your efforts.

“As for you, I can do no less than take your dastardly life that will complete my revenge. Look well at the knife. Its edge is keen. See, I approach it to your bosom

—that bosom where you hoped to pillow pretty Hero's head. Now no woman's head will ever rest there again. When your servants come to seek you in the morning, they will find but a ghastly corpse."

With these last words on his lips, Mansauel raised his hand high in the air, and, grinning like a mocking devil, buried his knife with fatal force into the heart of his victim. Then he softly glided from the room.

Here we take leave of him. But the after-history of this wicked, vindictive man may yet be written.

The police succeeded in making very few arrests at Briarmere, the majority of the gamblers making their escape, when they saw they were likely to be wanted, through several secret doors that had been provided for such an emergency.

Monsieur de Noir and Hortense fled with the rest. The latter had intended to seek Barton, when the first excitement was over, and compel him to support her handsomely. But she was baffled even in this last resort; the news soon reached even the obscure place in which she had hidden herself of his awful and mysterious death—a death that electrified the whole city at the time of its occurrence and baffled the most experienced detectives. If Ned Bachman had his own suspicion in regard to the matter, he wisely kept it to himself.

Hortense had dearly loved the unfortunate libertine, with whom she had carried on a guilty liaison for such a length of time. For months she was inconsolable, and actually kept herself secluded from the world. A year healed the wound, however. She is now the reigning beauty and belle of the most hopelessly vile of all the vile Baden-Baden gambling-hells. The miserable past failed to teach her the lesson she so much needed.

Of course Ned and Hero were married, and live at the Hall to cheer the declining years of George Bachman, and

people the dear old rooms with bright and happy faces. Life is very bright to them now; and they deserve it.

About a week after Captain Lavern's death, a poor ragged little figure crept into the parlor at the Hall, and threw herself upon the floor at Hero's feet.

"Dear lady," said the voice of the girl Nancy, which was scarcely audible for her tears, "I tried to save you when you were in danger. Now will you take me and help me to lead a better life?"

Hero lifted her up and kissed her fondly.

"While I have a home, dear," she said with deep emotion, "you shall not want for one."

And she never has.

THE END.

OLD MEMORIES.

CHAPTER I.

I HAD spent some years in the colonies, doctoring diggers and the like rough-and-ready folks. The novelty of the strange scenes and free-and-easy life had at last worn off, and I found myself sighing for the respectability of broadcloth and a settled position in my profession. Aided somewhat by thrift, and more by a fortunate land speculation, I had money enough to supply my wants for a few years to come; so I returned to England, resolved to beat out a practice somewhere.

Of course the first person I went to see was John. He was my brother—my only brother—indeed, the one tie I had to England. We were a couple of orphans, but pretty sturdy ones withal, and well able to wrestle with the world. Fortunately, our father lived until his eldest son was of an age to carry on his snug country practice; so John still occupied the old red-brick house in the main street of the little town of Dalebury, the same brass plate on the door doing duty for him as for his father before him.

I found old John—so his closest friends ever called

him—little changed: rather graver in mien, perhaps, but with the same honest eyes and kindly smile, winning at once the confidence, and soon the love, of men and women. As we clasped hands and looked in each other's faces, we knew that the years which had made men of us had only deepened our boyish love.

It was pleasant, very pleasant, for a wanderer like myself to find such a welcome awaiting him. It was good to sit once more in that cozy old room and talk with John late into the night, discussing all that had happened since last we sat there. I had many questions to ask. Dalebury is only a little town. Having been born and bred there, I knew all the inhabitants. I had not been abroad long enough to forget old friends, so I plied John with many inquiries as to the fate of one or another. After a while I asked:

"Who lives now in the old house at the corner—where the Tanners lived once?"

"A widow lady and her daughter, named Dorvaux."

"French, I suppose, from the name?"

"No, I believe not. Her late husband was French; but, so far as I have learned, Mrs. Dorvaux is an English-woman."

"New-comers! They must be quite an acquisition to Dalebury. Are they pleasant people?"

"I don't know—at least, I only know the daughter. She is very beautiful," added John, with something very much like a sigh.

My quick ears caught the suspicious sound. Could I be on the eve of an interesting discovery?

"Very beautiful, is she? And what may her Christian name be?"

"Fleurette—Fleurette," replied John, repeating the

soft French name, and lingering upon it as though it were sweet to his lips, like wine.

Then he changed the conversation, and far away we drifted from beautiful maidens and musical names, as I recounted some of my colonial exploits—how I had treated strange accidents, out-of-the-way disease, ghastly gunshot wounds; until our talk became purely professional, and without cheerfulness or interest for the laity.

I spent the next day in looking up old friends and neighbors. I had brought money back with me—not very much, it is true, but rumor had been kind enough to magnify the amount, so every one was glad to see me. Mind, I don't say this cynically; I only mean that, leaving the nuisance of appeals to the pocket, for old sake's sake, out of the question, all must feel greater pleasure at seeing a rolling-stone come back fairly coated with moss than scraped bare. So all my old friends made much of me, and I wondered why the world in general should be accused of forgetfulness.

Whilst I was at one house, another visitor entered, and I was introduced to Miss Dorvaux. As I heard her name, the recollection of my grave brother's midnight sigh made me look at her intently and curiously; more so, I fear, than politeness allowed.

Now you must decide for yourself as to whether Fleurette Dorvaux was beautiful. When I say, candidly, that only one person in the world admires her more than I do, that only one person is her more devoted slave than I am, I confess myself a partial witness, whose testimony carries little weight. But to my eyes, that day, Fleurette appeared as follows: About twenty years of age: scarcely middle height, but with a dainty, rounded figure; bru-

nette, with dark-brown eyes, long black lashes, making those eyes look darker—such black eyebrows and such black hair! nose, mouth, and chin as perfect as could be: such a bright, bonny, lively little woman! Not—I decided at first—the wife for a hard-working, sober doctor like John Penn.

Stay—is the girl so bright, so lively, after all? On her entry she had greeted my friends with a gay laugh and merry words, emphasized with vivacious little French gestures, and for a few minutes she was all life and sunshine. She seemed interested when she heard my name, and with easy grace began talking to me thoughtfully and sensibly. As she talked, something in her manner told me that life was not all sweetness to her. At times her bright brown eyes looked even grave and serious, and the smile, even on her lips as she spoke, softened to a pensive one. The first impression she made on me, the idea that she was only a brilliant little butterfly thing, left me, and I hastened to atone mentally for the wrong I had done her by saying to myself, “I am for once mistaken; the girl has plenty of sense, and, likely enough, will and purpose in that pretty head of hers.” However, grave or gay, wise or foolish, I saw in Fleurette Dorvaux a beautiful girl, and pictured woe for many a youth in Dalebury.

After John had seen the last of his patients that night, he joined me in the old room, and with a bottle of good wine between us I said:

“I saw your beautiful Miss Dorvaux to-day.”

John started as he heard her name, but made no reply; so I determined to learn all that was to be learned.

It was a very easy task. Old John had never yet been able to keep a secret from me—it may be he never meant

to keep this. Anyway, in a short time I heard the whole history of his love.

Fleurette and her mother came to Dalebury some twelve months ago, and John, whose heart had been proof against all local charms, had at once surrendered. There was something in the girl so different from all others. Her beauty, her gracefulness, even her pretty little foreign ways, had taken him by storm; and, so far as I can judge from the symptoms he described, his case was very soon as desperate as that of a boy of twenty. It may be the very strength of the constitution which had so long defied love made the fever rage more fiercely. Yet, severe as the attack was, the cure seemed easy enough. He had a comfortable home and a good income to be shared; so he set to work seriously to win Fleurette's love. All seemed going on as well as could be wished; the girl appeared happy in his society, and, if she showed him no tangible marks of preference, pleased and flattered by his attentions. Yet at last, when he asked her to be his wife, she refused him—sweetly and sadly, it is true, but nevertheless firmly refused him.

Now, although I, being four years younger, and, moreover, his brother, choose to laugh at John—call him grave, sober, and old—you must understand this is all in jest and by way of good-fellowship, and that John Penn was a man whom any girl should have been proud of winning. He was no hero, or genius, or anything of that sort; but then most of us move about ordinary men and women, and only know heroes, heroines, and geniuses, as we know princes and dukes—by name. He was a clever, hard-working doctor, with a good provincial practice. Modesty deters me from saying much about his personal appearance, as the world sees a strong like-

ness between us. I will only say he was tall and well-built, and carried in his face a certain look of power, which right-minded women like to see with men who seek their love. His age was something over thirty. Our family was good and our name unsullied. What could have induced Fleurette Dorvaux to reject him? Beautiful she might be; but the times are mercenary, and beautiful girls don't win the love of a man like John every day in the week.

Although John told me all about it in a cynical sort of way—a way which sat upon him as badly as another man's coat might have done, he could not conceal from me how deeply wounded he was—how disappointed—or how intense had been his love for the girl. As he finished his recital I grasped his hand, saying, with the assurance of one who has seen much life:

“Hard work is the best antidote, and you seem to have plenty of that—you will forget all about it in time, old fellow.”

“I don't think I shall. I feel like a man who, having been kept in twilight all his life, is shown the sun for an hour, and then again put back into twilight. He will forget the sun no more than I shall forget Fleurette.”

“She seemed to me such a sweet girl,” I said doubtfully.

“She is perfect,” said John. “You have seen nothing of her as yet. Wait until you can fathom the depths of thought and feeling under that bright exterior. Then you will say I was not wrong in loving her as I did—as I do even now.”

“Has any one else won her? Was that the reason she refused you?”

“No one. She loves me, and me only.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, greatly surprised.

“That evening when she told me firmly and decisively she would never marry me—never could marry me—even whilst I said mad, cruel words to her, I saw love in her tearful eyes. And when, forgetting all, I held her and kissed her once, and once only, I felt her lips linger on mine. Then she broke away and fled; but I know such a woman as Fleurette Dorvaux would not suffer a man’s kiss unless she loved him. She wrote me a few lines the next day, telling me it could not be, begging me not even to ask her why. Since then she shuns me, and all is at an end; so please talk no more about it.”

Here was a nice complication! Here was a knot to untie! John refused by a girl who loved him! I own I was glad to hear him assert his belief in her love, as somehow it pained me to think of Fleurette sporting with a man’s heart. Although, as I told you, I determined at first that she was not the right wife for John, I had soon recanted, and thought now how wonderfully she would light up the old house, and how happy John would be with such a bright little woman to greet him when he returned of an evening weary and fagged.

So I resolved to see all I could of Fleurette; to study her, and if I found her as good as John said she was, to use my skill in untying the knot and soothing the strands of their lives. I never doubted my ability to arrange the matter. I had always been an able family diplomatist. Had I not, at New Durham, brought Roaring Tom Mayne back to his faithful but deserted wife, and seen them begin life together again with courage and contentment? Had I not made those two old friends and partners—who for some time had been prowling about with revolvers in their pockets, hoping to get a snap shot at each other—

shake hands, and eventually left them working a new claim together? Had I not stopped pretty Polly Smith from running away with that scamp Dick Long, who had two or three wives already somewhere up country. In fact, so successful had I been in arranging other people's affairs, that it seemed, to an experienced hand like myself, an easy matter to place John and Fleurette on a proper footing.

Dalebury is a very little town. Its enemies even call it a village; but, boasting as it does of a mayor and a corporation, it can afford to treat their sneers with contempt. Different people may hold different opinions as to whether life is pleasanter in large cities or small towns; but, at any rate, one advantage offered by a small place like Dalebury is, that everybody knows everything about every one else. You cannot hide a farthing rushlight under a bushel. So if anybody has anything to keep secret, don't let him pitch his tent in Dalebury.

With the universal knowledge of one's neighbor's affairs pervading the Dalebury atmosphere, it is not strange that the first person I chose to ask hastened to give me all the information respecting the Dorvaux that Dalebury had as yet been able to acquire. Mrs. Dorvaux was a widow; not rich, but, it was supposed, fairly well off: she was a great invalid, and rarely or ever went out. Appearing to dislike society, she received no one, and scarcely any one knew her. Those with whom she had been brought in contact stated she was a quiet, lady-like woman, who spoke very little. It was not known whence they had come—probably France; but this was only conjecture—and the absence of certainty on this point rather distressed Dalebury. They kept only one servant, an old woman, who had been with them many

years. Fleurette had made many friends, and, it seemed, few, if any, enemies. She did not go out much, being devoted to her invalid mother; but every one was glad of her company when she chose to give it. Altogether, Dalebury had nothing to say against the new-comers—a fact speaking volumes in their favor.

After this, as we were such near neighbors, I used frequently to encounter Fleurette, and would often join her and walk with her. Whether she knew that John's secret was mine I could not say, but she met my friendly advances half-way. The more I saw of her, the more I wondered how I could have thought her so lively and gay. Whatever she might seem to others, there was, to me at least, a vein of thoughtful sadness in the girl's character—at times I fancied it even approached to despondency; and I felt almost angry with her, knowing that a turn of her finger would bring one of the best fellows in England to her feet. We met old John once or twice as we were walking together. Fleurette cast down her long lashes and simply bowed.

"Of course you know my brother well?" I said.

"I have often met him," answered Fleurette calmly.

"And you like him, I hope?"

"I like Dr. Penn very much," she replied simply.

"He is the best fellow and the best brother in the world," I said; and then I told Fleurette what we had been to each other as boys: how John had been as careful of me as the mother who was dead might have been—how we loved each other now; and, as I spoke, I saw a blush on her clear brown cheek, and although she said nothing her eyes when they next met mine were wistful and kind.

"I shall soon make it all right," I thought, as I noted

her look and resolved to argue the matter on the first fitting occasion.

There is a little river—a tributary to a larger one—running through Dalebury. Being too shallow for navigation, it is not of much use except as a water-supply and for angling. Still, one who knows it can get a boat with a light draught a long way up. One afternoon, thinking a little exercise would do me good, I procured such a boat, and started to row up as far as I could, and drift leisurely back with the current. For some distance on one side of the stream are rich, fertile meadows; and the path along the bank, through these meadows, is a favorite walk with the Dalebury folk.

As I paddled my boat up the stream, guiding its course by the old landmarks—which came fresh to my memory as though I were a boy yet—and startling the water-rats, descendants of those among whom John and I made such havoc years ago, I saw in front of me on the river bank the dainty little figure of Fleurette. As I looked at her over my shoulder, I could see she was walking slowly, with her head bent down, as one in thought. “Thinking of John and her own folly, perhaps,” I said. So preoccupied was she, that the sound of my oars did not attract her attention until I was close to her. Then, seeing who it was, she waited while I rowed to the bank on which she stood.

“Good afternoon, Miss Dorvaux,” I said; “if you will step into my boat, I will row you as far as the shallows will let me, and then back home.”

Fleurette hesitated.

“Thank you, Mr. Penn; I think I prefer strolling along the river bank.”

“In that case I shall tie my boat to this willow-stump,

and, with your permission, walk with you. But you had far better come with me; the boat is quite safe, and I have not forgotten my cunning."

"I am not afraid of that," said the girl, stepping lightly into the stern of the boat; while I thought, "Here is the chance to reason and expostulate," and in my conceit felt certain that my arguments would let me bring Fleurette back ready to accept her fate. Well, pride goeth before a fall!"

Yet for a while I said nothing to my companion. I did not even look at her. Poor little Fleurette! I saw, as soon as we met, that tears were on those dark lashes. The smile on her lip belied them, but the tears were there, nevertheless. So I waited for them to disappear before I talked to her, although I half suspected my words might bring others to replace the vanishing drops.

Presently Fleurette cried, in a voice of pleasure:

"There are some water-lilies! Can we get them?"

With some trouble I got the boat near them, and Fleurette gathered three or four. As she sat opening the white cups and spreading out the starry blooms, I said:

"Why are you always so sad, Miss Dorvaux?"

"Am I sad? Very few people in Dalebury give me credit for that, I fancy."

"My eyes look deeper down than the Dalebury eyes. To me you are always sad. Why is it? You have youth, beauty, and, if you wished it, could have love. Why is it?"

Fleurette turned her eyes to mine.

"Do you think these pale lilies have any hidden troubles, Mr. Penn?"

"None, I should say. They toil not, neither do they spin, you know."

"The people who toil and spin are not the only ones who are unhappy in the world," said Fleurette softly.

"Nor are the water-lilies the only flowers that shut up their hearts, and only open them after great persuasion."

She placed one of the white stars in her dark hair, and said :

"We are getting quite poetical this afternoon. Was that a kingfisher flew by?"

Of course it was no more a kingfisher than it was an ostrich ; and as Fleurette was now my prisoner in mid-stream, I was not going to let her escape or evade my questions for any bird that flew.

I steadied the boat with an occasional dip of the oars, and, looking her full in the face, asked :

"Fleurette, why do you treat John so strangely?"

Her eyes dropped.

"I scarcely understand you," she said.

"You understand fully. Why did you refuse to marry him?"

"I might plead a woman's privilege. If we cannot choose, we can at least decline to be the choice of any particular man."

"You might plead it if you did not love him ; but you will not plead it, Fleurette. It is because I know you love him that I ask you for an answer to my question."

Her fingers toyed nervously with her lilies, but she said nothing.

"If I thought you did not care for him—if you can tell me so—my question is answered, and I am satisfied. Answer me, Fleurette?"

She raised her head, and I saw her brave brown eyes shining through her tears.

"The proudest day in my life was when John Penn

asked me to be his wife—the happiest day would be the day I married him, and that will be—never.”

“Never, Fleurette?”

“Never—never—never! Unless—”

Here the girl gave a sort of shudder, and covered her eyes with her hands.

“Tell me what obstacle there can be,” I said gently.

“I cannot. I will not. If I could not tell John, why should I tell you?”

“Your mother is a great invalid, is she not?” I asked, after a pause.

“Yes,” replied Fleurette.

“Is it possible you fear that John would wish you to leave her? Is that the reason, Fleurette?”

“I will tell you nothing,” she said, firmly. “Put me ashore, please.”

“Very well, Miss Fleurette,” I said, resting on my oars. “Then I give you fair warning, I shall never cease until I find out everything.”

The girl’s face flushed with anger.

“What right have you,” she cried, “to attempt to pry into my private life? I hate you! Put me ashore at once.”

Fleurette not only had a will, but a temper of her own.

“I will not,” I said, “until you give me some message I can take to John—some word that will let him live on hope, at least.”

“Will you put me ashore?” said Fleurette, stamping her foot.

My only answer was a stroke of the oars, which sent the boat some yards further up the stream.

“Then I shall go myself,” said Fleurette; and before

I could comprehend her meaning, she simply slipped overboard, and in a couple of seconds was standing on the river-bank, with the water dripping from her petticoats. She darted across the meadow without even looking back, and left me feeling supremely ridiculous. The river was scarcely knee-deep at this point, so she ran no risk of drowning, and only suffered the inconvenience of wet shoes and skirts; but I could not divest myself of the idea that had there been six feet of water there, the beautiful little vixen would have gone overboard just the same. I had been completely outwitted by a girl of twenty—but then no one could have imagined that a young lady of the present day, attired in an elegant walking-dress, would jump out of a boat to avoid his society, however angry she might be. Yet I felt very foolish as I drifted back to Dalebury, and doubted much if I had done John's cause any good.

"After all," I said, "perhaps my boasted tact and diplomacy only pass muster in the free-and-easy community of New Durham, and I shall be a failure in England. I had better take the first steamer and go back again."

I met Fleurette in the road the next morning. Her face wore a demure smile.

"You treated me shamefully," I said.

"I should be the one to complain, I think. The idea of attempting to keep me against my will! My boots were spoiled; I was made most uncomfortable, and had to explain my draggled appearance as best I could."

"But fancy my horror when you stepped out of the boat, and picture what a fool I have felt ever since! Nevertheless, I forgive you," I said magnanimously.

"And I forgive you," said Fleurette, with deep meaning in her voice.

So we shook hands, and renewed our compact of friendship.

I had now been at Dalebury nearly a month, and purposed, while I had time to spare, to make a little trip to the Continent. I intended to stay there two months, then return and begin work. A few days before I left Danbury, I heard that some one was ill at the house at the corner; and, with the remembrance of Fleurette's wet shoes and stockings before me, I was very uneasy. However, we soon ascertained that Mrs. Dorvaux was the sufferer, and that Dr. Bush, from the other end of town, had been called in. I knew this was very annoying to John, as Dr. Bush and he were not the best of friends. In his professional capacity John would, I believe, have attended Fleurette herself without show of emotion; so why not Fleurette's mother? Nothing, of course, could be said, as we live in a free country, and people may employ what doctor they choose.

Evidently Mrs. Dorvaux's illness was not of long duration, for I soon saw Fleurette about again. She looked pale and worn, probably from watching and nursing her mother. My holiday at Dalebury had now run down to its last dregs, so when we met it was to say good-by.

"Can it never be, Fleurette?" I whispered, as our hands clasped before parting.

"Never," she replied—"never. Good-by—Good-by."

Poor old John! poor little Fleurette! What mystery was it that stayed the happiness of these two?

I returned home from my travels, tired of idleness. Having heard of an opening that promised well, I ran down to Dalebury to consult my brother. John and I were very bad correspondents, so I had no news of the

little town since I sojourned there. As I passed the house at the corner I saw it was void.

"They have left," said John, as I eagerly asked the reason.

"Left! Where have they gone to?"

"No one knows," said John, sadly. "Shortly after you went abroad, common rumor said they were thinking of quitting; and last month they did go."

"Did she leave no word—no message for you?"

"Only this," replied John, opening a drawer in front of him, in which he kept a variety of cheerful-looking instruments. "I found this one morning on the seat of my carriage. I suppose she threw it in."

A single flower, the stem passed through a piece of paper with the word "Adieu" pencilled on it.

Sorry as I was to hear the news, I could scarcely help smiling as John replaced the flower in the drawer. It seemed almost bathos, that little rose, tossed into a doctor's carriage, and now lying amongst old lancets, forceps, and other surgical instruments.

The weeks, the months, even the years, passed by, and we heard nothing of Fleurette. The flower, doubtless still lying in the drawer, was all that was left of old John's little romance.

CHAPTER II.

THREE years soon went by. I was still in England. I had purchased a share in a London practice, and although I found much drudgery in my work, it was a paying practice, and one which would eventually be en-

tirely mine, as my partner, who was growing old and rich, talked of retiring.

Once or twice in every year I had been down to Dalebury. All was the same there. John was still unmarried; and if he said nothing about her, I knew he had not forgotten the dainty little girl who had rejected his love. Yet not a word had Fleurette sent him. She might be dead or married for all we knew. I used often to wonder whether I should ever meet her again—whether I should ever learn her secret trouble; for I felt that Fleurette's sadness was not so much from having to give up the hope of being John's wife, as from the cause that compelled her to take that step. I could only hope, and say a word now and then to encourage John to hope also.

One day, while snatching a hasty lunch, I was informed that I was wanted at once. I found a respectable servant waiting for me.

"Please to come to my mistress at once, sir," she said. She is taken very ill, all of a sudden."

"Where does she live?" I asked. The servant named a street within a short distance, and in a few minutes I was at the house.

It was in that description of street which we term respectable—dull, quiet, and respectable—small houses on each side, letting at low rents; rents most likely decreasing as an old tenant left and a new tenant came in; the sort of place where the falling gentleman and the rising clerk or workman meet in their downward and upward course. On our way I asked the servant what had happened to her mistress.

"I found her sitting in her chair, sir, looking so wild and talking such gibberish, that I came for you as fast as I could."

She led the way to a sitting-room. "Mistress was in there when I left; will you please go in, sir?"

I went in, but no mistress was visible. I saw, with a quick glance, that the room was prettily furnished—many little feminine knick-knacks lying about. Hanging to an easel near the window were two dead birds, a goldfinch and bullfinch, and on the easel stood a China plate, painted with a faithful representation of the models.

"Decayed gentlefolks," I said to myself, as the servant's voice, calling me from above, put an end to all further speculations. There was evident alarm in the girl's accents; so I hastened up-stairs, and just inside the door of a bedroom saw a woman lying on the floor either dead or insensible.

With the servant's assistance I lifted her up and placed her on the bed; then proceeded to ascertain what was the matter. It needed, alas! very little professional skill to determine the primary cause of her illness.

I had before me one of those sad cases, unfortunately becoming more and more common, of drunkenness in one whose education and station in life should have raised her far above such a vice. There was no doubt about it. Even if the odor of the woman's breath had not told me the truth, I had seen too many drunken women in my time to be deceived. I could do little to relieve her, then; and after assuring the frightened servant that her mistress was in no danger, I placed her comfortably on the bed, and gave the girl instructions to loosen her clothes. As she did so, I looked with pity and some curiosity on the unhappy woman.

She was a lady, evidently—so far as the common sense of the word reaches—delicately nurtured and well dressed. Her features were pleasing, regular, and refined—yet, in

spite of all this, she lay here a victim to the same vice that urges the brutal collier to pound his wife to death, and causes the starving charwoman to overlie her wretched baby.

I did not like to expose her weakness to her own servant, so promised to send round some medicine, and to look in again in the evening.

As I stood with the door half open, and turned to give the servant some last instructions, a girl passed by me hastily, not even seeming aware of my presence. Before I had time to speak, or even to look at her, she had thrown herself on her knees beside the bed, and was weeping bitterly over the unfortunate woman. Her face as she knelt was hidden from me, but I could see her hair was black, and something in the turn of her graceful figure struck me as being familiar.

"Oh, my poor mamma! my poor mamma!" she sobbed out. "What shall I do?—again, again! Oh, poor mamma!"

I drew near and said, "You need not be alarmed at your mother's illness, she will soon recover."

The girl rose on hearing my voice. She turned round quickly and looked at me. Lo and behold, she was our long-lost Fleurette!

Fleurette—and, as I could see, even through her sorrow, as beautiful as ever! I advanced with outstretched hands; but the girl drew herself up and waved me aside with the dignity of a diminutive empress.

"And so, as you threatened, you have intruded upon my privacy. Go—I will never speak to you again."

"Miss Dorvaux," I answered, almost as angry as herself, "Your servant will tell you how I happen to be here, and you will see it is from no wish to intrude. I am

going now, but shall return to see my patient this evening, when I hope, for the sake of old days, you will give me a few minutes' conversation."

Then, as Fleurette returned weeping to her mother, I departed, revolving many things in my mind, as the writers say.

I had found Fleurette at last. Actually living within a stone's-throw of my door! Perhaps she had lived there ever since she left Dalebury. Now having found her, what was I to do with her? I guessed that I had also fathomed her mystery. You see, it was only a commonplace, vulgar little mystery, after all—a mother's drunkenness the sum-total of it. Yet, when I thought of the girl giving up her love and bright prospects for the sake of keeping her erring mother's vice a secret: most likely never complaining of the sacrifice: wearing to the outer world a bright face that hid from nearly every one the sorrow of her heart, it seemed to me that our little Fleurette was something very near a heroine, after all.

My first idea was to telegraph to John and tell him where to find her: but upon consideration I thought it better to wait until after our interview in the evening.

I found Fleurette alone. She was very pale, very sad, very subdued—very different, indeed, from the angry young woman who had walked into the river three years ago, or the unjust tyrant who had ordered me from her presence that afternoon. My first inquiry was after her mother. Poor Fleurette colored as she told me that lady was now almost convalescent, and she did not think I need trouble to see her again. Then she held out her hand, and as I took it said:

"Please forgive me for my unjust words to-day; but I was so vexed, I scarcely knew what I said."

"We are always forgiving each other, Fleurette. Brothers unto seventy times seven—why not sisters also?"

Fleurette smiled sadly and hopelessly.

"Tell me, Fleurette," I said, gently, as I sat down beside her, "was this the cause?"

She nodded her pretty head.

"Tell me all about it. How long has it been going on? I can be as secret as you."

And then Fleurette told me. I will not give her words. They were too loving, too lenient, and ever framing affectionate excuses. It was a piteous little tale, even as she told it—a tale of hope growing stronger every day, till in one hour it was crushed, as a flower is crushed under-foot. Then came penitence, contrition, shame, and the ever-recurring vows of amendment. And with them hope sprung afresh and bloomed for a while—only to be cut down as ruthlessly as before. And so on for years, ever the same weary round, and, although she told me not, ever the same loving care, the same jealous resolve to shield her mother's sins from the vulgar gaze. It was a hard burden for a girl to bear. For this she gave up the hope of being John's wife. She would not leave her mother to perish, and would not injure John, as she shrewdly feared might be the case if she subjected him to the scandal of having a mother-in-law of Mrs. Dorvaux's disposition living with him. Knowing as I know the delicate susceptibilities of patients in a place like Dalebury, in my heart I thought that Fleurette was right.

"And why did you leave Dalebury?" I asked when she had finished her recital.

"Mamma was—ill—there; so ill, I was obliged to send for a doctor—and I feared people might learn the cause."

So that was why Dr. Bush had been called in instead of John.

"Then we came to London," she continued. "London is so large, I thought we might hide ourselves here."

"How often do these—these attacks show themselves?" I asked.

"Sometimes not for months; sometimes twice a month. Oh, do you think she can ever be cured? She has been so good, so good for such a long time! If I had not gone out to-day, this might never have happened. Our poor old servant died some months ago, and I could not trust the new one, or she might have prevented it. Do you think she can be cured?"

I shook my head. I knew too well that when a woman of Mrs. Dorvaux's age has these periodical, irresistible cravings after stimulants, the case is well-nigh hopeless. Missionaries, clergymen, and philanthropists tell us pleasing and comforting tales of marvellous reformatations, but medical men know the sad truth.

I was so indignant at the sacrifice of a young girl's life, that, had I spoken my true thoughts, I should have said, "Leave the brandy-bottle always full, always near at hand, so that—" Well, I won't be too hard on Fleurette's mother. She must have had some good in her, for the girl to have loved her so.

We had, as yet, said nothing about John. That was to come.

"Fleurette, I shall write to John to-night. What shall I tell him?"

Her black eyelashes were now only visible.

"What can you tell him? You promised to guard my secret."

"I shall, at least, tell him I have found you, and then he must take his own course."

"Oh, don't let him come here," pleaded the girl. "I could not bear to see him; and perhaps," she added, with a faltering voice, "he doesn't care to hear anything about me now."

Ah, Fleurette, Fleurette! after all, on some points you are only a weak woman.

The next day I begged leave of absence from my partner and patients, and ran down to Dalebury to tell John the news.

Yet I had little enough to tell him. I was in honor bound to guard the girl's secret; so all I could say was, I had found her again, that she was as bewitching as ever, and, I believed, loved him still. I could add that now I knew the reason why she could not come to him, and I was compelled to own it was a weighty one—an obstacle which I could give no hope would be removed for many years. He must be content with that: it was all the news, all the hope, I had to give him.

"Very well," said John, with a sigh, "I must wait. All things come to the man who waits; so perhaps Fleurette will come to me at last."

Now that I had found Fleurette, you may be sure I was not going to lose sight of her again. I was very grieved to learn that her mother's circumstances were not so good as of old. Some rascal who possessed the widow's confidence had decamped with a large sum of money. Our Fleurette eked out their now scanty income by painting on china, and very cleverly the girl copied the birds and flowers on the white plates. She

never complained, but to me it was more than vexatious to think that there was a good home waiting for her if her mother's faults would allow her to accept it. Now and again I would give John tidings of her. He never sought her, being far too proud to come to her until she sent for him; and as in the course of the next twelve months the unhappy Mrs. Dorvaux experienced three or four relapses, I could see little chance of John ever getting the message for which he waited. I begged Fleurette to persuade her mother to enter a home for inebriates, but the girl would not even broach the subject to her; so here was youth drifting away from John and Fleurette—kept apart for the sake of a wretched woman, and I was powerless to mend matters.

* * * * *

But did John and Fleurette ever marry? You see, this is not a romance, only a little tale of real life, and, as such, the only way out of the deadlock was a sad and prosaic one—a way for which poor Fleurette could not even wish. Reformation, I say, as a medical man, was out of the question.

I hope Fleurette will not read these pages, in which I am compelled to express my true feelings by saying that, a short time after a year had expired, Mrs. Dorvaux was obliging enough to die. I say “obliging” advisedly, for sad though it be to think so, her death made three people happy; indeed, as her life was so miserable to her, it may be I should have said four. Fleurette mourned her sincerely: all her faults were buried in her grave, and left to be forgotten. Two months after her death I wrote to John, bade him come to town, and, without even warning Fleurette, sent him to see her. Then he found that all things do indeed come to the

man who can wait—even the love that seemed so hopeless and far away.

I don't think John ever knew, or, unless he reads it here, ever will know, the true reason why Fleurette refused him and shunned him for so long. He knows, from what I told him, that it was a noble, self-sacrificing, and womanly motive led her to reject his love, and is content with knowing this. He feels the subject must be ever painful to his bright little wife, and has never caused her pretty eyes to grow dim by asking for an explanation. There is no sadness now with Fleurette. She lights up that old red-brick house; she is the life of Dalebury, and moreover the one woman against whom Dalebury says little or nothing.

The last time I was down there I rowed Fleurette a long way up the shallow stream. Not only Fleurette, but a couple of children as well—dark-eyed, bonny boys, who chatter in French and English indiscriminately. As we passed the spot where the aquatic escapade took place, I turned with a smile to my sister; but before I could speak, she said beseechingly:

“Don't, please—don't. Old memories are always sad. The present is happy; the future promises fair—let us forget.”

And as she spoke, for a moment I saw the sad eyes of the Fleurette of old days. Old memories are sorrowful—let them die!

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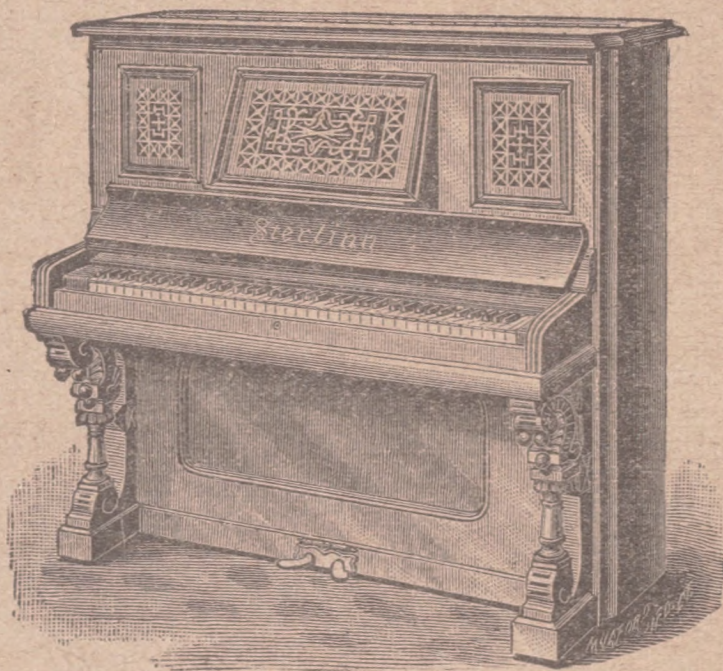
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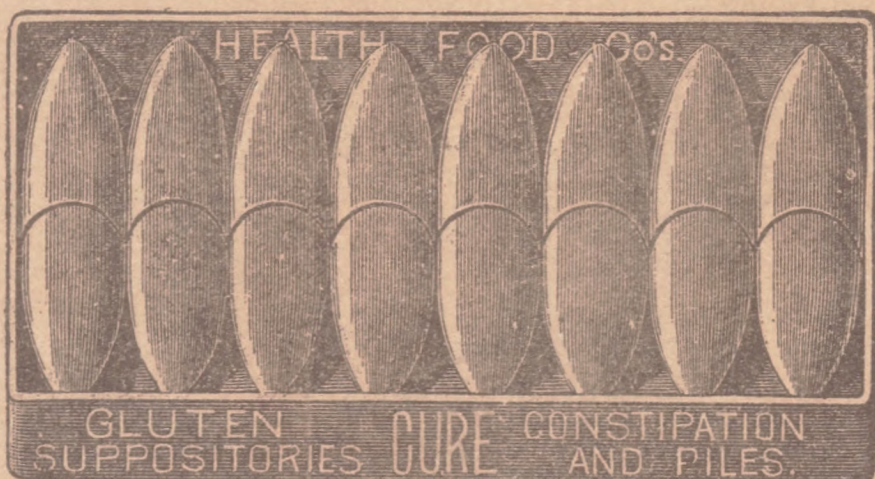
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